UNIT 8: JOHN KEATS: "TO AUTUMN" & "ON A GRECIAN URN"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read the poems "To Autumn" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and relate them to Keats' artistic inclinations
- interpret the poems critically in terms of the various themes
- discuss the major themes of the poems prescribed
- explain Keats' poetic style as reflected in the poems prescribed

8.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall embark on a discussion of Keats' poem "To Autumn" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The first poem was occasioned by an experience gained by Keats after walking through the water meadows of Winchester, England, in an early autumn evening of 1819. The poem has three stanzas of eleven lines that beautifully describe the taste, sights and sounds of autumn. It was composed on 19th September 1819, and published in 1820, in a volume of Keats' poetry that included *Lamia* and *The Eve of Saint Agnes*. "To Autumn" is the final work in a group of poems known as Keats's "1819 Odes." The poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", was written by Keats in May 1819 and published anonymously in the January

1820 in the magazine *Annals of the Fine Arts.* This poem is one of his great odes of 1819 which include “Ode on Indolence”, “Ode on Melancholy”, “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode to Psyche”. Keats was inspired to write the poem after reading two articles by English artist and writer Benjamin Haydon. Besides, it can be assumed that Keats was aware of other works on classical Greek art, which reinforced his belief that classical Greek art was idealistic and captured Greek virtues, which forms the basis of the poem. Divided into five stanzas of ten lines each, the ode contains a narrator’s discourse on a series of designs on a Grecian urn. The poem focuses on two scenes: one in which a lover eternally pursues a beloved without fulfilment and another of villagers about to perform a sacrifice.

8.3 READING THE POEM: “TO AUTUMN”

8.3.1 The Text of the Poems

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-eaves 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-brimmed their clammy cells.
Who hath not seen the 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 in a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep
Drowsed with the fume of poppies while thy hook
Spares 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 oozing, 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-sallows, 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.

Reading the Poem:

“To Autumn” has a close-knit structure, divided into three stanzas, each consisting of eleven lines and describing a distinctive phase or aspect of autumn. The poem begins with a direct address to autumn season with an air of adoration and reverence: “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!”

Thus, the very beginning suggests the on setting of a day through the image of mist and, by extension, connotes the advent of the season itself. However, what you should look for, while reading the poem, is not the images themselves, but the dynamic relationship among them. The ‘mists’ conjoined with the ripe fruits create a somewhat hazy spectacle of the usual landscape of an autumnal dawn. With the advent of the maturing sun, the haze disappears, thus enabling a clear vision of a variety of fruits. Though autumn is the obvious object of poetic imagination, it is not just an inert ‘object’. The first stanza, at a most obvious level, describes the ‘actions’ performed by autumn, a positively ironic result of its conspiracy with the ‘maturing sun’. The heightened eulogy of autumn, thus, resides in those positive actions; it has to do with the metrical pattern, with accent falling on the verbs-‘load’, bless’, ‘fill’, swell’, ‘plump’ etc.

through its capacity for active agency. Autumn also acquires a deity-like stature, suggested by the word 'bless' which carries a religious connotation.

Basically, **the first stanza** suggests a state of plenty and abundance when autumn sets in, beautifully suggested by the image of swarms of bees gathering honey while the hives are already full, and in images like 'to bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees'. The poet beautifully suggests developments in the natural order. Sometimes, these developments are suggested through clipped but resonantly poised images (to bend with apples etc.) whereas poetic imagination also pursues the dynamics of vegetative maturation through a succession of images ordered like quickly passing cinematic shots, involving passage of time:

"To set budding more,

And still more; later flowers for the bees"

This strain of dynamic imagination culminates in the unwitting loss of subject/object division in the imagined delusion of the bees:

"…until they think warm days will never cease

For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells."

Further, such a delusion suggests a sort of vexed wonder at the state of plenitude that autumn has to offer.

Thematically, the **second stanza** has a different focus; it describes the activities on the field related to harvesting, thus implicitly bringing the human into the scene. It starts with a rhetorical question: "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?"

Here Keats employs a new rhetorical strategy: the whole idea of autumn is concretised and transposed into a human figure. Autumn is personified as a **winnower, reaper, gleaner** and **cyder-presser** in the first place, the 'winnower' is 'sitting careless on a granary floor'. The word 'careless' connotes an assured and self-absorbed mental state. With no concern for the past or anticipation of the future, autumn is, as it were, driven by its own state of abundance achieved through harvest. This sense of serene and

unthinking fulfilment is carried to a new height in the image of the reaper:

“Or in a half-reaped furrow sound asleep
Drowsed with the fume of poppies…”

Drowsiness leads to forgetting; one forgets his/her present self and reality and moves to a kind of ecstasy. The same drowsiness is invoked at the beginning of the poem “Ode to a Nightingale” when the poet writes:

“My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I have drunk.”

However, in the Nightingale poem, the poet-persona forgets himself only to be transported to the place of the ‘other’ (i.e. the nightingale), whereas in “To Autumn”, we have autumn’s narcissistic relation with itself.

The image of the gleaner presents an apparent contrast in that it suggests cautious balancing of the load over the head while wading through a brook. Nevertheless, it does not suggest pang of labour; contrary to it, the movement of the gleaner is rhythmic, as indicated by the poetic rhythm achieved through alliteration and assonance:

“And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook.”

In the fourth image there is a shift in focus from the near-panoramic to the microscopic, from the harvesting of corns to the making of apple juice. The cider-presser is watching the last drop of juice, unmindful of the passage of time. The cider-presser is watching without being watchful overseer, but optimistic and expectant, oblivious to the rest of the world.

The **third stanza’s** explicit focus on sound comes through sudden evocation of a ‘lack’ and through a comparison established between it and the Spring season: “Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?” It carries an elegiac note, and bemoans, as it does, the lack of the kind of sound audible during spring. However,

this depressing tone is promptly overpowered by a sort of vehement urge to ‘restore’ the glory of the Autumn season:

“Think not of them; thou hast thy music too.”

In addition, what follows till the end is, technically, a demonstration of how autumn has its own music. Sights and sounds described in the third stanza are of an evening landscape, a stark contrast to the scenery dominated by the ‘maturing sun’. Thus, it also describes the final phase of the season, its ‘evening’, the stage of its proximity with winter. Sometimes, the tragic awareness of how the beautiful autumn must give way to winter adds to the landscape a rare beauty:

“While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue.”

In John Keats, as we shall discuss in relevant context, imagination, beauty and truth have a close connection. In fact, the pursuit of truth and beauty and the working of imagination are the grounds from where his poetry emerges. In poetry, truth lies in beauty that imagination can grasp. In the above-mentioned image, the implicit comparison of the evening sky with the blooming of a flower indicates how the beauty of autumn reaches a new height at its time of departure, betraying a desire to retain the season in a state of permanence.

The intermittently heard ‘wailful choir’ of the gnats carries an elegiac tone, and it eclipses the vehement and forceful self-satisfaction evoked in the second line of the final stanza. The glory of abundance characteristic of the first phase and the aesthetic of self-absorbed autumnal labour in the second phase become in the final phase of autumn a tragic spectacle of withdrawal: “And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.”

So, you should note that the poem contains three eleven-line stanzas to describe a progression through the autumn season, from the late maturation of the crops to the harvest and to the last days of autumn when winter is nearing. The imagery is richly

achieved through the personification of Autumn, and the description of its bounty, its sights and sounds. However, the underlying meaning of the poem bears tremendous significance. Of all of Keats's poems, "To Autumn", most closely describes a paradise as realised on earth while also focusing on archetypal symbols connected with the season. Within the poem, autumn represents growth, maturation, and finally an approaching death. Thus, one can find a fulfilling union between the ideal and the real.



LET US KNOW

How different critics have viewed the poem "To Autumn" [adapted from Wikipedia]

- Walter Jackson Bate pointed out that 'death' in this poem implies the renewal of life and that the structure of the verse reinforces the sense of something to come.
- Harold Bloom emphasised the "exhausted landscape", the completion, the finality of death.
- Helen Vendler sought to discuss "To Autumn" as an allegory of artistic creation. As the farmer processes the fruits of the soil into what sustains the human body, so the artist processes the experience of life into a symbolic structure that may sustain the human spirit.
- Jerome McGann argued that while the poem was indirectly influenced by historical events, Keats had deliberately ignored the political landscape of 1819. Countering this view, Andrew Bennett, Nicholas Roe and others focused on what they believed were political allusions actually present in the poem, Roe arguing for a direct connection to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819.
- In his 1999 study of the effect on British literature of the diseases and climates of the colonies, Alan Bewell read the landscape of ''To Autumn'' as "a kind of biomedical allegory of the coming into being of English climatic space out of its dangerous geographical alternatives."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What do you think of the ‘conspiracy’ of autumn? How do the various sensory images reveal the state of abundant fruition?

Q 2: How do the various sensory images reveal the state of abundant fruition?

8.3.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes in the poem “Ode to the West Wind”.

The Seasons:

However, a poem about autumn, “To Autumn” also invokes other seasons and sees autumn in its circular link with them. What is established in the beginning of the poem is both its rupture and continuity with summer. Whereas the appearance of ‘mists’ heralds the advent of autumn, this season is no different from summer with respect to vegetative developments in nature. Abundance of fruits is distinctively autumnal through the imagined speculation of the bees:

“Until they think warm days will never cease
For summer has o’erbrimmed their clammy cells.”

A distinctive change in tone and colour of landscape in the third stanza reveals the approaching of evening darkness and, by extension, of winter. The faint sound of swarms of gnats or the loud bleating of the lambs carry a suggestion of withdrawal and death. The advent of winter and the end of autumn is more distinctively indicated by the image of the swallows, which hover in the evening sky, ready to desert the place. Spring is not immediately linked to autumn in the circular chain of the seasons. However, the musical aspect of Spring prompts the poet to explore autumn’s own music. When comparison is made of the music of both the seasons, what is implicitly established is their tonal variation, as autumn is seen to

have risen from its state of self-centred narcissism and become tragically self-conscious.

Time and Permanence:

Autumn is a permanently recurring phenomenon. In our conception of seasonal round, it exists as a determinate sequence. Yet, it is not an abstraction or a definite set of fixed qualities. The poem explores the three different stages of autumn comparing it to three stages of a day from sunrise till sunset. Hence, the passage of time is an important aspect in the experience of the season. When there is appreciation of plenitude what is withheld is the awareness of the passage of time; and when this awareness enters the text, what follows is the opposite side of plenitude: a spectacle of emptiness and a hopeless plea for longer stay (look, for instance, at the image of ‘stubble-plains’ and ‘the wailful choir of the gnats’.). Oblivion to the passage of time also betrays an inward plea for permanence. In the second stanza, the still, lingering images of the reaper falling asleep and the winnower sitting carelessly on a granary floor, or the cyder presser looking at the last drops of juice suggest such a plea for permanence.



LET US KNOW

You will do well to know that Keats wrote this poem about a month after the Peterloo Massacre (1819). Peterloo Massacre occurred at St Peter’s Field, Manchester, England, on 16 August 1819, when cavalry opened fire on a crowd of 60,000–80,000 people who had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation. Critic Nicholas Roe finds an obvious connection between the poem and the massacre. The atmosphere of tensed expectant brooding that prevails in this poem carries a new resonance, given the historical context of the massacre.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Make a comparison between “To Autumn” and “Ode to a Nightingale” to see how the poet creates varied moods and tone in different stanzas.

Q 4: Discuss how Keats establishes a close link between the structure and the themes within an integrated whole in this poem.

8.4 READING THE POEM: “ODE ON A GRECIAN URN”

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Reading the Poem:

The poem begins with the speaker standing in front of an ancient Grecian urn by describing it as the “bride of quietness”. The narrator addresses the urn by saying:

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness!
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time (lines 1–2)

He also describes the urn as a “historian” that can tell a story. He wonders about the figures on the side of the urn and asks what legend they depict and from where they come. He looks at a picture that seems to depict a group of men pursuing a group of women and wonders what their story could be:

“What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?”

The speaker describes the urn as a “foster-child of silence and slow time” because it was created from stone and made by the hand of an artist who did not communicate through words. Time has little effect on it and ageing is such a slow process that it can be seen as an eternal piece of artwork. The urn is an external object capable of producing a story outside the time of its creation, and because of this ability the poet labels it a “sylvan historian” that tells its story through its beauty:

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flow’ry tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

In the second stanza, the speaker looks at another picture on the urn, this time of a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker says that the piper’s “unheard” melodies are sweeter than mortal melodies because they are unaffected by time.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone: (lines 11–14)

He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen in time, he should not grieve, because her beauty will never fade.

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 17–20)

In the third stanza, he looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never shed their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his songs will be “for ever new,” and happy that the love of the boy and the girl will last forever, unlike mortal love, which lapses into “breathing human passion” and eventually vanishes, leaving behind only a “burning forehead, and a parching tongue.”

For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. (lines 27–30)

In the fourth stanza, the speaker examines another picture on the urn, this one of a group of villagers leading a heifer to be sacrificed. He wonders where they are going:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

The final stanza begins with a reminder that the urn is a piece of eternal artwork.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold pastoral! (lines 41–45)

The audience is limited in its ability to comprehend the eternal scene, but the silent urn is still able to speak to them. The story it tells is both cold and passionate, and it is able to help mankind. The poem concludes with the urn’s message:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (lines 46–50)

8.4.2 Major Themes

[Adapted from http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/keats/section4.rhtml]

John Keats’ poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” beautifully showcase his attempt to engage with a sculpture—the Grecian urn, passed down through countless centuries to the time of the speaker’s viewing. The urn, according to the speaker, exists outside of time in the human sense—it does not age, it does not die, and indeed, it is alien to all such concepts. In the speaker’s meditation, this creates an intriguing paradox for the human figures carved into the side of the urn. They are free from time, but they are also frozen in time. They do not have to confront aging and death (their love is “forever young”), but neither can they have experience (the youth can never kiss the maiden; the figures in the procession can never return to their homes). You should note that the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” discusses art and its representation. While a poem like “Ode to a Nightingale” appeal to auditory sensations while ignoring the visual, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” focuses on the visual aspect of art.

The speaker attempts three times to engage with scenes carved into the urn; each time he asks different questions of it. In the first stanza, he examines the picture of the “mad pursuit” and wonders what actual story lies behind the picture: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?” But, the speaker is forced to abandon this line of questioning as the figures on the urn lack identities. In the second and third stanzas, he examines the picture of the piper playing to his lover beneath the trees. Here, he tries to

imagine what the experience of the figures on the urn must be like and tries to identify with them. He is mesmerised by their escape from temporality and attracted to the eternal newness of the piper’s unheard song and the eternally unchanging beauty of his lover. He thinks that their love is “far above” all transient human passion, which, in its sexual expression, inevitably leads to an abatement of intensity—when passion is satisfied, all that remains is a wearied physicality: a sorrowful heart, a “burning forehead,” and a “parching tongue.” Thus, the second section of the poem, describing the piper and the lovers, meditates on the possibility that the role of art is not to describe specifics but universal characters, which falls under the term “Truth”.

The final two lines, in which the speaker imagines the urn speaking its message to mankind—”Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” have proved among the most difficult to interpret in the Keats canon. After the urn utters the enigmatic phrase “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” no one can say for sure who “speaks” the conclusion, “that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” It could be the speaker addressing the urn, and it could be the urn addressing mankind. If it is the speaker addressing the urn, then it would seem to indicate his awareness of its limitations: The urn may not need to know anything beyond the equation of beauty and truth, but the complications of human life make it impossible for such a simple and self-contained phrase to express sufficiently anything about necessary human knowledge. If it is the urn addressing humankind, then the phrase has rather the weight of an important lesson, as though *beyond* all the complications of human life, all human beings need to know on earth is that beauty and truth are the same. It is largely a matter of personal interpretation which reading to accept.

Keats believed that art should not provide history or ideals. Instead, both are to be replaced with a philosophical tone that dominates the meditation on art. The sensual aspects are replaced with an emphasis on the spiritual aspects, and the last scene

describes a world contained unto itself. In this scene, the speaker contemplates where the boundaries of art lie and how much an artist can represent on an urn.



LET US KNOW

Critical Reception of the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" [adapted from Wikipedia]

- In an anonymous review in the July 1820 *Monthly Review*, it was stated that "Mr Keats displays no great nicety in his selection of images. According to the tenets of that school of poetry to which he belongs, he thinks that anything or object in nature is a fit material on which the poet may work ... Can there be a more pointed *concetto* than this address to the Piping Shepherds on a Grecian Urn?"
- Another anonymous review followed in the 29 July 1820 *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* that quoted the poem with a note that said: "Among the minor poems, many of which possess considerable merit, the following appears to be the best."
- Josiah Conder, in a September 1820 *Eclectic Review*, argues: "Mr Keats, seemingly, can think or write of scarcely anything else than the 'happy pieties' of Paganism. A Grecian Urn throws him into an ecstasy: its 'silent form', he says, 'doth tease us out of thought as doth Eternity.'
- George Gilfillan, in an 1845 essay on Keats, placed the poem among "The finest of Keats' smaller pieces."
- Alexander Smith in an article on Keats in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1857) stated: "Perhaps the most exquisite specimen of Keats' poetry is the 'Ode to the Grecian Urn'; it breathes the very spirit of antiquity,—eternal beauty and eternal repose."

- Matthew Arnold claimed that the passage describing the little town "is Greek, as Greek as a thing from Homer or Theocritus; it is composed with the eye on the object, a radiancy and light clearness being added."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: State the central message of the poem "Ode on Grecian Urn."

Q 6: Why does Keats proclaim that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"?

8.5 KEATS' POETIC STYLE

Critics have argued that the odes best reveal Keats' poetic genius, and "Ode to a Nightingale" in particular transcends his earlier limitations. The literary historian Edward Elbert writes of Keats' poetic style like the following:

"his (Keats's) early verse was rich in melodic beauty and decorative effect full of colour and the images of the senses… …but often the result was an over-luxuriance and a lack of restraint which betray his, as yet, uncertain taste and the weakness of his artistic economy… …in the new Keats all the qualities of the old are restrained by a restraint and poise, a delicacy of touch and a purer taste and the result is one of the most striking of all English poetic style."

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, 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 the gnats, bleating of the lambs, cry of the grasshoppers, whistle of the red-breast-all constitute the music of autumn.

The **second stanza** employs the device of **personification** when autumn is visualised as a human engaged in various autumnal activities. First, it is seen as a winnower sitting beside a granary floor in a carefree state of self-contentment, then as a reaper who falls asleep in a field leaving the work incomplete, then as a gleaner wading through a brook cautiously carrying the load over head, and finally as a cyder-presser.

Another important aspect of Keats's poetic style is its musicality. You will notice that the rhyme scheme of "To Autumn" is complicated. The poem is divided into three stanzas, each having eleven lines, with distinctive

combinations of rhyming sound, yet showing a basic rhyme-pattern: a b a b c d e c d d e. However, there is a variation in the first stanza the fifth line rhymes with the ninth and tenth, while the sixth line rhymes with the eighth. In effect, such a rhyming structure restraints the poetic exuberance, thus making the poem one of the formally and stylistically flawless poems by the poet.

The poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, on the other hand, follows the same structure of an ode as one can find in his “Ode on Melancholy,” though it varies more in the rhyme scheme of the last three lines of each stanza. Each of the five stanzas in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is ten lines long, metered in precise iambic pentameter, and divided into a two part rhyme scheme, the last three lines of which are variable. The first seven lines of each stanza of the poem follow an ababcde rhyme scheme, but the second occurrences of the cde sounds do not follow the same order. In stanza one, lines seven through ten are rhymed dce; in stanza two, ced; in stanzas three and four, cde; and in stanza five, dce, just as in stanza one. As in other odes (especially “Autumn” and “Melancholy”), the two-part rhyme scheme (the first part made of ab rhymes, the second of cde rhymes) creates the sense of a two-part thematic structure as well. The first four lines of each stanza roughly define the subject of the stanza, and the last six roughly explicate or develop it.



8.4 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you have learnt that the poem “To Autumn” has been interpreted variously as a meditation on death, as an allegory of artistic creation, as Keats’ response to the Peterloo Massacre, which took place in the year of its publication; and as an expression of nationalist sentiment. One of the most anthologised of English lyric poems, “To Autumn” has been regarded by critics as one of the perfect short poems in the English language. “On a Grecian Urn”, on the other hand has been seen as Keats’ belief that art should not provide history or ideals. Instead, both are to be replaced with a philosophical tone that dominates the

meditation on art. The sensual aspects in his other odes get replaced with an emphasis on the spiritual aspects in "Ode on a Grecian Urn."



8.6 FURTHER READING

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. United States: Thomson Learning.

Albert, Edward. (1979). *History of English literature*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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Daiches, David. (1960). *A Critical History of English Literature.* (Vol. 4). New Delhi: Allied Publishers.

Evans, Ifor. (1940). *A Short History of English Literature*. London: Penguin Books.

Everest, Kelvin. (2002). *John Keats*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

Sanders, Andrew. (1994). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Web Resources:

http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/keats/section4.rhtml

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ode_on_a_Grecian_Urn



8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Apparently, it carries a negative tone… …however, the consequences of the conspiracy is positive… …the sensory images brings the state of abundance… …the use of criminal metaphor connotes productive energy.

Ans to Q No 2: Images of different fruits and their implicit taste… …because of the maturing sun, the fruits also implicitly carry a warm colour… …sense of touch evident in clammy cells… …image of overflow suggests saturation.

Ans to Q No 3: Different moods evoked in three stanzas in “To Autumn”… …in “Ode to a Nightingale” this tonal variation is more stark, abrupt and dramatic… …in “To Autumn”, moods correspond less to the vagaries of mind but to different stages of the season… …in the Nightingale poem, shifting has to do with the poet’s mind.

Ans to Q No 4: Three stanzas of equal number of lines… …they correspond to three distinctive stages of a day as well as the three phases of autumn… …structural divisions are in sync with the greater temporal divisions of the season.

Ans to Q No 5: John Keats’ poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” beautifully showcase his attempt to engage with the idea of art… …the urn exists outside of time in the human sense… …it does not age, it does not die… …this creates an intriguing paradox for the human figures carved into the side of the urn… …they are free from time, but they are also frozen in time.

Ans to Q No 6: In the final two lines, the speaker imagines the urn speaking its message to mankind—”Beauty is truth, truth beauty”… …the urn may not need to know anything beyond the equation of beauty and truth, but the complications of human life make it impossible for such a simple and self-contained phrase to express sufficiently anything about necessary human knowledge… …all human beings need to know that beauty and truth are the same.



8.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a critical appreciation of the poem ‘To Autumn’. How does the poet deal with the theme of time and permanence in the poem?

Q 2: How do you relate “To Autumn” to the Keatsean notions of truth, imagination and beauty? Comment on the imagery of “To Autumn”?

Q 3: Do you think that behind the apparently exclusive focus on the sensuous, there is, in the poem, a brooding speculations on the contending claims of beauty and time? Elaborate.

Q 5: What are the different ways in which critics have received the poems “To Autumn” and “Ode on Grecian art”?

Q 6: Provide a critical appreciation of the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” How does Keats deal with the ides of Art in this poem?

Q 7: What is an Ode? Write a note on Keats’ Ode with particular reference to the poems prescribed.

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