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KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

SEMESTER 2

ENGLISH

BLOCK 2: ROMANTIC POETRY II

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Subject Experts:

Prof. Pona Mahanta, Former Head, Department of English, Dibrugarh University
Prof. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami, Former Srimanta Sankardeva Chair, Tezpur University
Prof. Bibhash Choudhury, Department of English, Gauhati University

Course Coordinator: Dr. Prasenjit Das, Associate Professor, Discipline of English, KKHSOU

SLM Preparation Team:

Units	Contributors
7-8	Dr. Prasenjit Das **&** Dalim Ch. Das, Department of English, IDOL, GU
9-10	Dr. Tapati B. Kashyap Beltola College, Beltola

Editorial Team:

Content: Prof. Robin Goswami, Former Head, Department of English
Cotton College

Structure, Format and Graphics: Dr. Prasenjit Das

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SEMESTER 2
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 1: ENGLISH POETRY: ROMANTIC TO VICTORIAN
BLOCK 2: ROMANTIC POETRY II

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BLOCK 2: INTRODUCTION

There are total four units in this Block. In these units, the learners will get some ideas on the second generation of the Romantic poets.

Units 7-8 shall help you to discuss the poems "To Autumn" and "On a Grecian Urn" composed by John Keats, another poet of the Romantic period. 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. Thus, composed on 19 September 1819 and published in 1820 in a volume of Keats's poetry, this poem has been interpreted differently as a meditation on death, as an allegory of artistic creation, as Keats' response to the Peterloo Massacre, and as one of the perfect short poems in the English language. The second poem, on the other hand, is one of his greatest odes of 1819, which also 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.

Units 9-10 introduce you to yet other Romantic poets P. B. Shelley and his poem "Ode to the West Wind". Shelley was one of the most radical and the most revolutionary of the English Romantic poets. In this prescribed poem, which he wrote in a forest on the bank of the river Arno near Florence, Italy, Shelley invokes the 'wild' West Wind which scatters the dead leaves and spreads seeds so that they can sprout with the advent of the Spring season, and urges that the West Wind should hear him as he himself wants to become the West Wind to bring in reforms in his society.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the "FURTHER READINGS" which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 7: JOHN KEATS: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE:

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 John Keats: The Poet

7.3.1 His Life

7.3.2 His Works

7.4 Keats and the Tradition of English Odes

7.5 Reception of Keats as a Romantic Poet

7.6 Let us Sum up

7.7 Further Reading

7.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.9 Possible Questions

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 Keatsian. *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!"

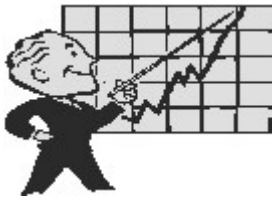
This stanza is characterised by an example of synaesthesia–a feature that recurs frequently in Keats' poetry. Synaesthesia is the use of imagery and language choices, which describe sensory impressions in terms of other senses. In the lines above, Keats manages to appeal to sight, colour, movement, sound, 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. 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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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UNIT 8: JOHN KEATS: "TO AUTUMN" & "ON A GRECIAN URN"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Reading the Poem: "To Autumn"

8.4 Reading the Poem: "On a Grecian Urn"

8.5 Keats' Poetic Style

8.6 Let us Sum up

8.7 Further Reading

8.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

8.9 Possible Questions

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-centered 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.
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
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

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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 1: Apparently, it carries a negative tone… …however, the consequences of the conspiracy are positive… …the sensory images brings the state of abundance… …the use of criminal metaphor connotes productive energy.

Ans to Q 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 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 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 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 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 Keatsian 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.

* * *

UNIT 9: P. B. SHELLY: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE:

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 P. B. Shelly: The Poet

9.3.1 His Life

9.3.2 His Poetic Works

9.4 Reception of Shelly as a Romantic Poet

9.5 Let us Sum up

9.6 Further Reading

9.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.8 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- identify Percy Bysshe Shelley as one of the prominent English Romantic poets
- identify Shelly's revolutionary spirit and assess its implications in the context of English Romanticism
- assess the importance of Shelly's literary aesthetics

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Percy Bysshe Shelley was one of the most radical and also the most romantic of the English Romantic poets. Born to an upper class family, he was expelled from Oxford University for publishing a tract *The Necessity of Atheism*. The conservative English society, unable to tolerate his radicalism, forced him to leave England permanently in 1818.His poetic genius is clearly explicit in his lyrics like "Alaster", "To a Skylark", "Adonais", "The Cloud", "Dejection near Naples" and in verse dramas like *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*. As a critic, Shelley, in his *A Defence of Poetry,* claimed for poets the status of 'the unacknowledged legislators' of mankind.

9.3 P. B. SHELLY: THE POET

From an early age, Shelley showed an inclination towards radicalism and unconventionality and this one characteristic of Shelly as a poet gets reflected in almost all his poems. Like his own life, Shelley's poetry can be divided into two distinct moods. While in the longer poems, he gives vent to his passion for reform, in the shorter ones, he laments the hardships into which he is forced into. In his longer poems like *Queen Mab*, *Revolt of Islam*, *Hellas* and *Witch of Atlas*, he presents himself as the violent reformer. A dreamer of unrealisable dreams, Shelley, in his life as well as in poetry, always protests against religion, kingship, marriage and other conventional institutions.

9.3.1 His Life

Shelley was born in Field Place, near Horsham, Sussex, in 1792. He descended from noble and old families of influence. From childhood, he lived in a world of fancy, so real that certain imaginary dragons and headless creatures of the neighbouring wood kept him and his sisters in a state of fearful expectancy. From an early age, he developed a liking for the classics and did not accept the ordinary processes of learning. Shelley's first public school, kept by a hard-headed Scotch master with its floggings and its general brutality, seemed to him like a combination of hell and prison. When he entered the famous preparatory school at Eton, he was by then fed up with the existing institution and he promptly organised a rebellion against the brutal fagging system. All his friends called him as "mad Shelley". After his Eton experiences, Shelley found causes for rebellion in all existing forms of human society and he finally left school "to war among mankind," as he tells of himself in the *Revolt of Islam.*



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

The next phase of Shelly's academic life begins with the University of Oxford. The subsequent influence of Hume's philosophy prompted him to publish a pamphlet called "The Necessity of

Atheism". It was such a controversial piece that it led to his expulsion from the University in 1811.Soon thereafter, his involvement and his elopement with Harriet Westbrook, a school girl who was attracted by his revolutionary doctrines, caused a permanent break with his family. Subsequently, the duo started wandering about England, Ireland and Wales, and Shelley's father disinherited him because of this ill-considered marriage. But, unfortunately, the pair soon got separated. By the beginning of 1812, Shelly met William Godwin, and this was followed by Shelley's marriage Mary Godwin, the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1816, Shelley travelled to Europe with his wife and thereupon developed an association with Lord Byron. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" dates from this period as does Mary's novel *Frankenstein*. His return to England was marked by the association with the group surrounding Leigh Hunt, who then was the editor of the radical newspaper *The Examiner*. That group consisted of John Keats and William Hazlitt. Shelley's long poem, *The Revolt of Islam* dates from this period. In 1818, Shelley left England and went to Italy. After wandering over Italy for some time, he finally settled in Pisa where his best poetry was written along with the company of Byron, Hunt and Trelawney. *Prometheus Unbound* was written in Rome in 1819. Between 1819 and 1820, Shelley went to Florence, and it is there that he completed both *Prometheus Unbound* and "Ode to the West Wind."

Throughout his life, Shelley was hostile to English Social institutions. But subsequently, in his later life, he came to realise the error of his rebellion. In 1822, when he was only thirty years of age, he was drowned while sailing in a small boat off the Italian coast. One finds that in all Shelly's works– epic, narrative and lyric alike– his devotion to liberty and his whole-hearted belief in love are the primary themes.

The poem "Ode to the West Wind" is one of the greatest and most powerful odes with remarkable structural excellence in English literature. This unit has helped you to discuss how Shelley's exquisite and beautiful thoughts are expressed through effective images. Through this ode, the poet expects a bright future to follow the bleak

present. It is his earnest desire to see humankind liberated from the deadening effect of authority. This notion distinguishes Shelly from the other Romantic poets. This poem reveals Shelley's own ideas about the changes which he wanted to make upon the world and humanity. Shelley's style abounds in personification and metaphors. The West Wind marks the end of summer and the beginning of the rainy season. In the wind, Shelly comes to discover a symbol for his own emotional pattern and his revolutionary zeal filled him with a passion for reforming the world.

9.3.2 His Works

Shelley was a reformer as well as a poet. Arthur Crompton Rickett has said the following words in favour of P. B. Shelly: "Little interested in the past, mindful only of the present, when it jarred on his social idealism his eyes are fixed intensely on the future. To renovate the world, to bring about Utopia, that is his constant aim, and for this reason we may regard Shelley as emphatically the poet of eager, sensitive youth of the visionary and reformer. In his earlier years, Godwin was the figure who most readily impressed his mobile imagination… In later life Wordsworth's influence is more clearly discernible. But most potent influence came from Greek literature." Such an analysis of Shelly's role as a poet helps us to understand the different aspects of Shelly's poetry.



LET US KNOW

A revolution to Shelley was much more than a political upheaval; it was a spiritual awakening, the beginning of a new life. On the other hand, Love, for Shelley, was a transcendental force kindling all things into beauty and no poet felt more deeply the dynamic influence of love in moulding human destiny. But critics are of the view that the dreamlike quality of Shelley's verse is a defect rather than a merit. The beauty of the visible world strikes his prismatic imagination and is dissolved into rainbow colours. Arnold called Shelley an 'ineffectual angel beating in void his luminous wings in vain.'

Besides lyrical dramas, Shelley became famous as someone who wrote longer poems, lyrics, odes, and sonnets. The poems like *Queen Mab*, *Alaster*, (or The Spirit of Solitude), *The Revolt of Islam*", *Epipsychidion* and *The Triumph of Life* constitute the bulk of his longer poems. "Adonais", written on the death of Keats, is perhaps his only elegy. Written in 1821, "Adonais" is a noble and eloquent elegy, the finest of his non-lyrical pieces. As in "Adonais", he celebrates his love and admiration of a brother poet, so in *Epipsychidion* he voices his affection for certain feminine influences that have entered his life. *Hellas* (1822) is inspired by the Greek Revolution, to which Byron gave his life. While his *Prometheus Unbound* reflects the superb lyrical invention of the poet as well as his intense humanitarianism.

His lyrics and odes include the names of some of his famous poems like: "Stanzas written in Dejection near Naples", "Ode to the West Wind", "The Cloud", "Ode to a Skylark" and so on. The more popular sonnets of Shelly are" Ozymandias of Egypt" and "England in 1819". In his lyrics like "The Cloud" and "The Ode to the West Wind", we confront a logical development of ideas that blends perfectly with the exquisite music, making it a thing of thought and beauty all compact. The cloud becomes the part of a nature myth of flawless beauty. The complete identification of the poet with his subject, the superb rush of music, the crystalline clearness of the picture, not for a moment marred by over-profusion of metaphor, as we can find in the poem, "The Skylark", are some of the distinctive qualities of Shelly's poetry.



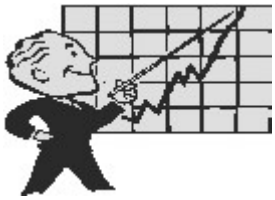
LET US KNOW

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follow the bleak present. It is his earnest desire to see mankind liberated from the deadening effect of authority. This notion distinguishes Shelly from the other Romantic poets. This poem reveals Shelley's own ideas about the changes which he wanted to make upon the world and humanity. Shelley's style abounds in personification and metaphors. The West Wind marks the end of summer and the beginning of the rainy season. In the wind, Shelly comes to discover a symbol for his own emotional pattern and his revolutionary zeal filled him with a passion for reforming the world.

Critics would also like to argue that one of Shelley's earliest works *Queen Mab* (1813) is individual enough in its outcry against the unspiritual forces that weigh down in expression and, but it is crude in expression and is obviously written under the influence of Robert Southey's oriental outlooks. In the next poem "Alaster" (1816), Shelley found his true greatness as a poet. Written under the inspiration of congenial companionship and of the glories of Alpine scenes, we find ourselves bathed in that atmosphere of luminous beauty and ethereal music which is so peculiarly Shelleyan. The aspiring youth in the poem is the poet himself on his quest for life. It is the revolt of the imagination against the limitations of human life. Following this poem, and spiritually akin to it, is the fine "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816) and the glowing tribute to "Mont Blanc" (1816).

However, many would like to argue that Shelley is a lyricist rather than a narrative artist. According to Swinburne, "his thoughts, words, deeds all sang together." Shelley, as J. A. Symonds pointed out, is "the loftiest and the most spontaneous singer of our language." Detested by men, Shelley often sought the company of nature. In the first place, he loves to transform aspects of nature into dream shapes of his own, as the skylark into 'a cloud of fire', 'a high–born maiden in a palace tower', 'a glow-worm golden'. Shelley prays to nature for help when he falls 'upon the thorns of life.' Finally, nature for him, as it is to Wordsworth, interfused with a universal spirit, which bursts into beauty.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why was Shelly expelled from Oxford University?

Q 2: What is Shelly's idea of a Revolution?

Q 3: How does Shelly conceive the idea of nature in his poetry?

Q 4: What, according to you, is the idea of imagination and creativity in the context of the poem "Ode to the West Wind"?

Shelley's essay "A Defence of Poetry" is a reply to the charges made against poetry by Thomas Love Peacock in "The Four Ages of poetry". Here, Shelley espouses his views about poetry. The Defence shows very clearly and most distinctly the influence of Plato, Sidney's *Apology*, and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* on him. Shelley conceived imagination to be the most essential part of the creative process. He believed that Reason and Imagination are the two mental processes– Reason being the power of external analysis, and Imagination being the power of insight. Shelley believed that Imagination in itself is an instrument of moral good. Like Plato, Shelley believed that poetry is the creative principle in man. Poets, according to Shelley, are not only authors of language and of music, but they are also the institutions of laws and the founder of civil society. He further argues "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Poetry, according to Shelley, is the expression of the universal spirit through words.

As a poet of Nature, Shelley is a Pantheist, because he finds a universal spirit or power working through Nature, controlling this universe. Pantheism is the belief that God is in everything and everything is God. Thus, Shelley is very fond of using the images borrowed from the natural world. He describes the objects of Nature with precision and scientific accuracy. Shelley pictures and presents Nature in its different moods– sometimes, Nature is presented in close association with human affections and sometimes she represents an absolutely detached and unconcerned way. Whereas

Wordsworth spiritualises Nature, Shelley intellectualises it and uses it as a symbol of his thoughts and emotions. So, naturally, the West Wind becomes the symbol of Shelleyan revolution, a destroyer and preserver. Similarly, the skylark becomes the symbol of that ideal happiness. In "Adonais", pansies are the symbols of his sad thoughts and violets symbolise his modesty and innocence. Shelley's treatment of Nature is scientific as well as philosophical, mythical as well as human. This is what is called Pantheism, based on the theory that all Nature is the expression of one Universal Spirit. The poet identifies the spirit of Nature and the spirit of love. He, thus brings about the Platonic philosophy of love with the age-old doctrine of Pantheism. Under the influence of this spirit of love, Shelley sees in every object of Nature a subtle beauty of the spirit, capable of thinking, feeling and expressing in quite the same way as man. Like Plato, Shelley conceived of a supreme power, which is at once immanent and transcendent and which moves through all objects of Nature and human life. This spirit, according to Plato, is the governing spirit of the universe. Like Plato, Shelly believed that this spirit moves through the universe giving things form and shape according to its power.

9.4 RECEPTION OF SHELLY AS A ROMANTIC POET

Shelley's lyric powers and romantic biography have until recently obscured Shelley's most enduring qualities as a writer: his intellectual courage and originality; his hatred of oppression and injustice; and his mischievous, sometimes macabre, sense of humour (especially evident in his light verse and letters). He was widely read in the classics, philosophy, and contemporary science; he translated from Greek (Plato and Homer), Latin (Spinoza), Spanish (Calderón), German (Goethe), Italian (Dante), and some Arabic fragments. His essays, though very few in number, are highly intelligent. His political pamphlets are both angry and idealistic. His weaknesses as a writer have always been evident: rhetorical abstraction; intellectual arrogance; and moments of intense self-pity. However, in poems

like the "West Wind," or in great prose work like *Defence,* he shows the volcanic hope for a better world, of fiery aspirations shot upwards through bitter gloom.

Shelley's *Letters* have been edited by F. L. Jones in 1964. The major political reinterpretation of his career has been done by K. N. Cameron in *Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (1951) and *Shelley: The Golden Years* (1974). Important modern criticism has also been produced by Harold Bloom (1959), Neville Rogers (1967), Judith Chernaik (1972), Timothy Webb (1976), and P. M. Dawson (1980).



9.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you must have come to discover the unique qualities of P. B. Shelly as a Romantic poet. For Shelley, Poetry is a source of pleasure that combines delight as well as wisdom. At the same time, his poetry is also the clarion call for liberty and equality. Finally, from your reading this unit, you must have understood why Shelley is called more a lyricist than a narrative artist.



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9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Shelly was fed up with the existing institutions both religious and political… …while in Oxford he was influenced by Hume's philosophy that led to the publication of "The Necessity of Atheism"…. …this led to his expulsion from the University in 1811.

Ans to Q 2: A Revolution to Shelley was much more than a political upheaval… …it was a spiritual awakening, the beginning of a new life… …the poem "Ode to the West Wind" represents his ideas in a remarkable way as he addresses the West Wind as both destroyer and preserver.

Ans to Q 3: Detested by men, Shelley often sought the company of nature… …he transformed aspects of nature into his own dream shapes… …for example, the skylark is viewed as 'a cloud of fire', 'a high–born maiden in a palace tower', 'a glow-worm golden'… … or he urges nature to help him when he falls 'upon the thorns of life'… …Nature for Shelly is interfused with a universal spirit.

Ans to Q 4: The West Wind is the symbol of both creation and destruction… …the use of different Nature images exemplifies his imaginative power… …Shelley's immortal message about creation through the regenerative role played by Nature.



9.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: Discuss Shelley's conception of man's relation to Nature, and how does he explore that relationship in his poems?

Q 2: How does his treatment of Nature differ from that of the other Romantic poets?

Q 3: Why does Shelly believe in poetry to be an instrument of moral good? Discuss.

Q 4: What makes "Ode to the West Wind" one of the greatest and most powerful odes with remarkable structural excellence in English literature?

Q 5: State the important works of Shelley as a Romantic poet, and discuss how these poems contributed to English Romanticism.

* * *

UNIT 10: P. B. SHELLY: "ODE TO THE WEST WIND"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Reading the Poems

- 10.3.1 The Texts of the Poems
- 10.3.2 Major Themes
- 10.3.3 Shelly's Poetic Style

10.4 Let us Sum up

10.6 Further Reading

10.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

10.8 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- analyse the poem "Ode to the West Wind" in terms of different aspects
- trace the different themes available in the poem
- explain Shelly's poetic style

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the Block entitled "Romantic Poetry II". In this unit, you will be introduced to one of the most anthologised poems of P. B. Shelly—"Ode to the West Wind". In this poem, the poet invokes the 'wild' West Wind, which scatters the dead leaves and spreads seeds so that they can sprout with the advent of the Spring season, and urges that the West Wind should hear him. Shelley wrote the poem in a forest on the bank of the river Arno near Florence. The notes on the poem tell us that he received the inspiration to write the poem from his experience of a strong West Wind that swept down from the Atlantic and through the Tuscan landscape of West-central Italy. From the different sections of this unit, you will be able to discuss the poem in question, in terms of its various aspects.

10.3 READING THE POEMS

10.3.1 The Texts of the Poem

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's beauty,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
The Winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
Her Clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:
Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver, hear, oh, hear!
Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,
Angels of rain and lightening: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the Zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge
Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might
Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear!
Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams
Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers
Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The spaless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves oh, hear!
If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be
The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skyey speed
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'ver have striven
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the throns of life! I bleed!
A heavy weight of hours has chained, and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift and proud.
Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,

Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Reading the Poem:

P. B. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" was composed in 1819. The poem was conceived in a wood that skirts Arno, near Florence, on a day when the West Wind was blowing strongly, heralding a storm at the beginning of the autumn rains. Shelly himself tells us about the genesis of the poem in the following words:

"This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapors which pour down the autumnal rains. They begin, as I foresaw, at sunset, with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions."

This means that the poem came out of a specific experience. The imagery of the poem clearly suggests an actual natural phenomenon that Shelly had observed.

The poem is divided into five stanzas which are as follows. In the **first** stanza, Shelley describes how the West Wind works over the Earth. All the seeds wake up when the azure sister of the West Wind's gives a rousing call to duty. The West Wind acts as shepherd driving the flocks of sheep to grazing ground. In the **second** stanza, Shelley explains how the West Wind blows so violently in the sky above as over the earth below. It causes a great upsurge in the sky and gives the signal of the approaching storm which is foreshadowed by the clouds scattered all over the sky. The West Wind spreads the dark clouds from one end of horizon to another. In the **third** stanza, Shelley addresses the West Wind as the spirit that affects the sea with its mighty power. The West Wind stirs the

tranquil surface of the Mediterranean when it seems to be sleeping peacefully in summer. The Mediterranean is so quiet in summer that the mansions and towers which once stood on its shores are reflected clearly on its surface. But when the West Wind starts blowing, the clear reflection vanishes. Such is the power of West Wind that it causes a great whirlpool in the Atlantic Ocean. In the **fourth** stanza, the poet stands badly in need of energy and strength. He is fully conscious of his limitations. Hence, he appeals to the West Wind to animate him with its power. He would like to be the dead leaf, a cloud or a wave to be swept along by its power. The poet is weak. He has been worn out with the trails and sufferings of life. He himself wants to be the West Wind so that he can drive his dead thoughts over the universe. In the **final** stanza, he passionately appeals to the West Wind to identify its spirits with his own. He feels that by coming in contact with his mind, the West Wind will be softened with the sadly sweet music autumn. Yet, he appeals to the wind to stimulate him in order that through the magic spell of his poetry, he may sing to the world the inspiring note of the coming millennium.

A special attraction of Shelley's poetry is his use of images which makes him one of the most typical and most admired of the later Romantic poets. His imagery tends to be abstract though highly passionate. F. R. Leavis remarks, perhaps justly, that Shelley at his best and worst offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void. Sometimes, he invests nature with human or divine attributes, such as we find in classical mythology. This myth making power is explicit in the poem "Ode to the West Wind", where the blue Mediterranean is no more a sea but a giant in deep slumber. Sometimes, Nature in Shelley, far from being dead matter in motion, lives a life of her own as human beings do. That is why Shelley prays to nature for help when he falls 'upon the thorns of life.'

"Ode to the West Wind" is often considered one of the most impassioned of Shelley's shorter poems. Structurally, the poem

consists of three parallel invocations of the West Wind in its three fields of operation—on the land, in the sky and on the sea. The invocations are followed by a prayer to the wind:

"If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power." (Lines: 43-45)

All seeds remain in embryo, until West Wind's sister, mild breeze of spring, comes and helps them sprout. It is important to note that the West Wind has been perceived in different ways. With the rousing call to action, the West Wind urges the seeds to wake up. Another connotation is that the West Wind acts as a shepherd driving the flocks of sheep to grazing ground. As the wind purifies the woods, so does the wind sweeten the sky, clear the ocean, and make stronger and sounder the heart of man. With each fresh variation of the original thought, the poet uses superb imagery, strengthening the main theme: "O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud." He further writes:

"Make me as thy lyre even as the forest is....
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" (Lines 57-64)

This poem thus reflects Shelley's own rebellious spirit, as available in most of his poems. The very spirit of Nature overpowers his poetic sensibilities which results in his superb and heart touching poems. Then from the general, the poem passes to the universal. The old world must go, and a new world must come with the Spring, laden with fresh sweet promises for suffering humanity. So, the poet utters:

"O, wind,
If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" (Lines 69-70)

The lyric ends with a significant rhetorical question and this expression continues to inspire people through its universal significance.



LET US KNOW

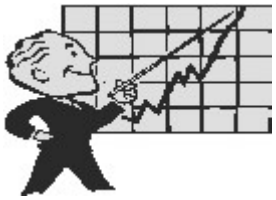
The fact that the poem "Ode to the West Wind" was written near Florence, Dante's city, may explain why Shelley used Terza Rima, the stanza form that Dante used in his *Divine Comedy*, but very rare in English odes. Terza Rima is a series of triplets with interlocking rhymes, aba, bcb, cdc, etc. Shelley modified the pattern by ending each of the five sections of the poem with a climactic couplet. In keeping with his Terza Rima stanza, he concentrates on the effects of the West Wind on three classes of objects: Leaves, Clouds, and Water. The combination of *Terza Rima* and the threefold effect of the West Wind provide the poem with a pleasing structural symmetry.

You should note that at around 1819, democracy was not making much progress in Europe. Readers and critics alike both seek to locate in Shelly's "West Wind" a liberating energy that would 'free' the common people from all sorts of bondages. Shelly expounds that if he had the power of the West Wind's mythical divinity, readers would read his poem and liberty will automatically prosper. As he writes:

> "Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!...
> Scatter…my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawakened earth
> The trumpet of a prophecy!" (Lines 61-69)

Although there remains a political undertone in this poem, you have seen that Shelley invokes the spirit of the West Wind in the true classical manner. The poet describes the activities of the West Wind in its two-fold capacities as destroyer and preserver. It blows so violently in the sky above as over the earth below. It causes a great upsurge in the sky and gives the signal of the approaching storm which is foreshadowed by the clouds scattered over all the

sky. The West Wind spreads the dark clouds from one end of the horizon to another and the sky resembles a tomb which is a sign of the advent of winter and the death of the year. The poet has compared withered leaves scattered by the West Wind to 'ghost from an enchanter fleeting.' And thus, Shelley also compares the West Wind as a magician who is unseen. "Ode to the West Wind" thus becomes one of the best examples of Shelley's poetic mind at work.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Tell briefly about the context in which the poem "Ode to the West Wind" was composed.

Q 2: What are the three fields of operation for the West Wind?

Q 3: Provide a very brief stanza wise summary of the poem.

Q 4: What is the significance of Shelly's use of Terza Rima in the poem "Ode to the West Wind"?

10.3.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the major themes of the poem "Ode to the West Wind."

The Poet as a Visionary:

In Shelley's poetry, the figure of the poet is not simply an entertainer or a moralist but a prophetic hero. The intimate connection with the natural world provides the poet with an access to profound cosmic truths. Thus, his poetry almost becomes a kind of prophecy, and through his words, he will try to change the world for a better future based on political, social, and spiritual change. Shelley's poet is a near-divine saviour, comparable to Prometheus and Christ often doomed to suffer as their visionary power isolated them from other common people. Finally, however, the poet triumphs because his art is immortal, outlasting the tyranny of government, religion, and society and living on to inspire new generations of people.

The Power of Nature:

Like many of the romantic poets Shelley demonstrates a great reverence for the beauty of nature, and feels closely connected to nature's hidden power. In his early poetry, Shelley shares the romantic interest in Pantheism—the belief that God, or a divine, unifying spirit, runs through everything in the universe. He refers to this unifying natural force in many poems, describing it as the "spirit of beauty" in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and identifying it with Mont Blanc and the Arve River in "Mont Blanc." This force is the cause of all human joy, faith, goodness, and pleasure, and it is also the source of poetic inspiration and divine truth. Shelley asserts several times that this force can influence people to change the world for the better. Nature destroys as often as it inspires or creates, and when it destroys, it does it cruelly and indiscriminately. For this reason, Shelley's delight in nature is mitigated by an awareness of its dark side. Sometimes, Nature in Shelley, far from being dead matter in motion, lives a life of her own. The cloud, thus, is not a mere mass of vapour hanging over the earth, but an active agent, bringing 'fresh showers for the thirsting flowers', bearing 'light shade for the leaves' and so on. That is why, Shelley prays to nature for help when he falls "upon the thorns of life". Finally, Nature to him is interfused with a Universal spirit which bursts in its beauty and its might from trees and beasts and men. It is therefore one of the many forms in which that spirit manifests itself. Of course, Shelley did not merely remain a worshipper of Nature in her simple and homely aspects, but turns to her awe-inspiring objects. In this poem, Shelley has presented the violence of the West Wind and the changeful glory of atmospheric effects, the terror of storms–those rare and awful manifestations of Nature when she puts on a supernatural grandeur.

Contemporary English Politics:

The poet desires the irresistible power of the wind to scatter the words he has written about his ideals and causes, one of which was opposition to Britain's monarchical government as a form of

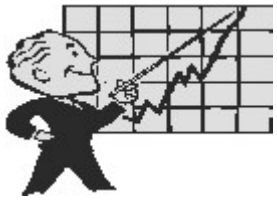
tyranny. Believing firmly in democracy and individual rights, he supported movements to reform government. In 1819, England's nobility feared that working-class citizens– besieged by economic problems, including high food prices– would imitate the rebels of the French Revolution and attempt to overthrow the established order. On August 16, agitators attracted tens of thousands of people to a rally in St. Peter's Field, Manchester, to urge parliamentary reform and to protest laws designed to inflate the cost of corn and wheat. Nervous public officials mismanaged the unarmed crowd and ended up killing 11 protesters and injuring more than 500 others. In reaction to this incident, Shelley wrote *The Masque of Anarchy* in the fall of 1819 to urge further nonviolent action against the government. This work was not published during his lifetime. However, "Ode to the West Wind'', also written in the fall of 1819, was published a year later. The poem obliquely refers to his desire to spread his reformist ideas when it says, "Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!" Shelley believed that the poetry he wrote had the power to bring about political reform: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World'', he wrote in another work, *A Defence of Poetry*.



Shelly follows Dante's Terza Rima, in which the middle line of each tercet rhymes with the first and third line of the next tercet, with the modification that there are five numbered sections, and each section consists of four triplets followed by a couplet.

Shelly's Prophetic View of History:

The lines "If winter comes can spring be far behind" can be read as a manifestations of Shelly's prophetic views of history, Shelly viewed Europe as pummeled into lethargy, as the poet himself is in the poem. Shelly saw that the French Revolution which promised real liberation had failed; the holy alliance suppressed freedom everywhere. Tuscany (Italy) the birth place of the poem was suffering foreign rule, and in England, revolutionary laws and actions by a conservative Government were opposed by Shelly. He believed that tyranny ensures its own demise. The inevitability of self-destruction of the evils of tyranny is the pacifist poet's ultimate self-inflicted retribution of tyranny. His is a prophecy of optimism but we all know that history is full of examples that Spring does not end in the cycles of Winter.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: State the important themes that are available in this poem?

Q 6: What is Pantheism? Do you think that Shelly successfully blends his pantheistic ideas in the poem "Ode to the West Wind'?

Q 7: How does the contemporary English politics inform the poem?

10.3.3 Shelly's Poetic Style

You must have already read that Shelly adopts the Terza Rima form in this poem which has helped the poet deal with the structure of the poem in a remarkable way. Shelley unifies the content of the poem by focusing the first three stanzas on the powers of the West Wind and the last two stanzas on the poet's wish to use these powers to spread his words throughout the world. If you notice the style of Shelly, you at once find an interesting rhyme scheme in this poem. Each stanza has three Tercets and a closing couplet. In poetry, a Tercet is a unit of three lines that usually contain end rhyme; a couplet is a two-line unit that usually contains end rhyme. In the following examples drawn from the second stanza of the poem however, line 2 of first Tercet rhymes with lines 1 and 3 of the next Tercet. Consider the first three Tercets of the second stanza. Notice that *shed* rhymes with *spread* and *head* and that *surge* rhymes with *verge* and *dirge*

"Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are **shed**,
Shook from the tangled boughs of heaven and ocean,"
(Lines 15-17)

"Angels of rain and lightning! there are **spread**
On the blue surface of thine airy **surge**,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the **head"** (Lines 18-20)
"Of some fierce Mænad, even from the dim **verge**
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,

The locks of the approaching storm. Thou **dirge"**

(Lines 21-23)

Another point to be noted is that all of the couplets in the poem rhyme, but the last couplet (lines 69-70) is an imperfect rhyme called Eye Rhyme.

"The trumpet of a prophecy! O **Wind**,
If winter comes, can Spring be far **behind**?" (Lines 69-70)

It occurs when the pronunciation of the last syllable of one line is different from the pronunciation of the last syllable of another line even though both syllables are identical in spelling except for a preceding consonant. For example, the following end-of-line word pairs would constitute eye rhyme: **wind** and **behind**.

You are already informed that Shelley's poetry offers a large variety of **images** in this poem. Cecil Day Lewis, in his *The Poetic Image* discussed Imagery in the following way: "The idea that imagery is at the core of the poem, that a poem may itself be an image composed from multiplicity of images, did not begin to have any wide official currency till the Romantic Movement. What do we understand by the poetic image? In its simplest terms, it is a picture made out of words. An epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or passage on the face of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality. Every poetic image, therefore, is to some degree metaphorical. So, imagery, that is images taken collectively, is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature. Even at the cost of repetition and monotony, Shelley uses piles of images. **Mist, cloud, water, wind, air** and **fire** are the elements out of which most of his images are drawn. But the elements which are most dominant are **darkness, light, water** and **fire.** He has rightly been described as the poet of light par excellence and for him earthly light is only a part or faint copy of "the light whose smile kindles the universe." His other images are

'wing', 'quiver', 'soar', 'fly', 'panting', 'fainting' and **'singing'**. But, the major source of his imagery is Nature or its four elements.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What is an image, according to Cecil Day Lewis?

Q 9: How does Shelly integrate the images of nature in this poem?



10.4 LET US SUM UP

From the different sections of this unit, you have learnt that "Ode to the West Wind", by P. B. Shelley, was written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence in October 1819, and published in 1820. The ode is a passionate invocation to the spirit of the West Wind, both "Destroyer and Preserver." It is composed in five sweeping stanzaic movements, each taking the form of a sonnet, but with complex musical patterns of internal rhyme and run-on lines, culminating in a breathless series of cries or questions. The symbolism used in the poem is rich. Shelley intends to state that the Wind is the seasonal force of renewal in Nature; it is also the power that produces self-sacrifice (or self-destruction) in personal life. Besides, in this poem Shelly expressed his 'unextinguished' political hopes as well as the very passion of his aspiration and creativity as a poet. Shelley's minute observations of wind, water, wood, cloud, and sky combine imagery which is simultaneously scientific, mythical, and even biblical. The total effect of the poem finally can be seen in terms of the poet's transcendent hope and energy, achieved through suffering and despair.



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Web Resources:

http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/Ode.html



10.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The poem was conceived in a wood that skirts Arno, near Florence… …on a particular day a tempestuous wind was blowing followed by a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions… …so the poem came out of a specific experience.

Ans to Q 2: The three parallel invocations of the West Wind are on the land, in the sky and on the sea… …the exact lines in the poem are "If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear; / If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;/A wave to pant beneath thy power."

Ans to Q 3: The **first** stanza describes how on earth the West Wind helps the seeds to sprout… … the **second** stanza explains how the violent West Wind in the sky gives the signal of the approaching storm… …The **third** stanza addresses the West Wind as the spirit that affects the sea by stirring the tranquil surface of the Mediterranean… …in the **fourth** stanza, the poet appeals to the West Wind to animate him with its power… …in the **final** stanza the poet urges the wind to stimulate in him the power to sing the inspiring note of the coming millennium.

Ans to Q 4: Terza Rima is the stanza form that Dante used in his *Divine Comedy*… …it is a series of triplets with interlocking rhymes, aba, bcb, cdc, etc. …. …Shelley modified the pattern by ending each of

the five sections of the poem with a climactic couplet…. the combination of Terza Rima and the threefold effect of the West Wind provides the poem with a pleasing structural symmetry.

Ans to Q 5: The visionary role of the poet… …the power of nature… …Shelly's concern over contemporary politics.

Ans to Q 6: Pantheism is the belief that God, or a divine, unifying spirit, runs through everything in the universe… ... "Ode to the West Wind best represents Shelly's pantheistic thinking… …the West Wind destroys as often as it inspires or creates, and when it destroys, it does it cruelly and indiscriminately… …Shelley's assertion is that this force can influence people to change the world for the better.

Ans to Q 7: Britain's monarchical government was seen as form of tyranny… …Believing firmly in democracy and individual rights, he supported movements to reform government… …Shelley believed that the poetry he wrote had the power bring about political reform… …the poem obliquely refers to his desire to spread his reformist ideas when it says, "Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind.

Ans to Q 8: An image is a picture made out of words… …figures of speech like epithet, metaphor and simile may create an image… …an image may convey to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality.

Ans to Q 9: His images are 'wing', 'quiver', 'soar', 'fly', 'panting', 'fainting' and 'singing'… …but the major source of his imagery is Nature or its elements like air, water, earth etc… …integration of all his images to signify his universal message… …through the images of Nature Shelley announces the theme of birth and rebirth.



10.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways does P.B. Shelly make connections between Nature and Art, and how does he illustrate such connections in "Ode to the West Wind"?

Q 2: Discuss Shelley's use of Nature imagery in "Ode to the West Wind".

Why does the poet call the West Wind, both a destroyer and a preserver?

Q 3: Comment on Shelly's use of the poetic persona as a reformer. What are the images he has used to signify that role?

Q 4: Do you think that Shelley uses too much figurative language in the "Ode to the West Wind"? What makes this ode different from any other type of Shelleyan lyric?

Q 5: How would you like to interpret the ideas of imagination and creativity in the context of this poem "Ode to the West Wind"?

Q 6: Comment on Shelley's integration of natural images into a vision of humanity and the Universe.

* * *

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