PART-II PAPER- I V & SEMESTER-II PAPER- DC IV

JOHN KEATS: ODE TO A NIGHTINGLE, TO AUTUMN

UNIT STUCTURE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this part of unit-I you will be able to

- Discuss Romantic poetry
- Discuss the life and work of John Keats as a Romantic poet
- Discuss the features of Keats' poetry
- Make yourself familiar with the major themes of his poetry

- Examine and analyse his poetic style
- Discuss what is it that makes his poetry unique

INTRODUCTION

Keats lived only for twenty five years, but within this short span of life he graduated in the school of pain and ecstasy. He saw in front of his eyes the death of his father, his mother and his younger brother and he lived with the realisation that he is going to die very soon. This personal experience of death and the mutability of everything had a tremendous impact on Keats's poetic world. However, the pain and suffering could not defeat the love and penchant for beauty which provided him the succour necessary to sustain the spirit.

The Romantic Movement in English Literature

The romantic period is a term applied to the literature of approximately the first third of the nineteenth century. During this time, literature began to move in channels that were not entirely new but were in strong contrast to the standard literary practice of the eighteenth century.

How the word *romantic* came to be applied to this period is something of a puzzle. Originally the word was applied to the Latin or Roman dialects used in the Roman provinces, especially France, and to the stories written in these dialects. *Romantic* is a derivative of *romant*, which was borrowed from the French *romaunt* in the sixteenth century. At first it meant only "like the old romances" but gradually it began to carry a certain taint. *Romantic*, according to L. P. Smith in his *Words and Idioms*, connoted "false and fictitious beings and feelings, without real existence in fact or in human nature"; it also suggested "old castles, mountains and forests, pastoral plains, waste and solitary places" and a "love for wild nature, for mountains and moors."

The word passed from England to France and Germany late in the seventeenth century and became a critical term for certain poets who scorned and rejected the models of the past; they prided themselves on their freedom from eighteenth-century poetic codes. In Germany, especially, the word was used in strong opposition to the term *classical.*

The grouping together of the so-called Lake poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey) with Scott, Byron, Keats, and Shelley as the romantic poets is late Victorian, apparently as late as the middle 1880s. And it should be noted that these poets did not recognize themselves as "romantic," although they were familiar with the word and recognized that their practice differed from that of the eighteenth century.

According to René Wellek in his essay "The Concept of Romanticism" (*Comparative Literature*, Volume I), the widespread application of the word *romantic* to these writers was probably owing to Alois Brandl's *Coleridge und die romantische Schule in England* (*Coleridge and the Romantic School in England*, translated into English in 1887) and to Walter Pater's essay "Romanticism" in his *Appreciations* in 1889.

The reaction to the standard literary practice and critical norms of the eighteenth century occurred in many areas and in varying degrees. Reason no longer held the high place it had held in the eighteenth century; its place was taken by imagination, emotion, and individual sensibility. The eccentric and the singular took the place of the accepted conventions of the age. A concentration on the individual and the minute replaced the eighteenth-century insistence on the universal and the general. Individualism replaced objective subject matter; probably at no other time has the writer used himself as the subject of his literary works to such an extent as during the romantic period. Writers tended to regard themselves as the most

interesting subject for literary creation; interest in urban life was replaced by an interest in nature, particularly in untamed nature and in solitude. Classical literature quickly lost the esteem which poets like Pope had given it. The romantic writers turned back to their own native traditions. The Medieval and Renaissance periods were ransacked for new subject matter and for literary genres that had fallen into disuse. The standard eighteenth-century heroic couplet was replaced by a variety of forms such as the ballad, the metrical romance, the sonnet, ottava nina, blank verse, and the Spenserian stanza, all of which were forms that had been neglected since Renaissance times. The romantic writers responded strongly to the impact of new forces, particularly the French Revolution and its promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The humanitarianism that had been developing during the eighteenth century was taken up enthusiastically by the romantic writers. Wordsworth, the great champion of the spiritual and moral values of physical nature, tried to show the natural dignity, goodness, and the worth of the common man.

The combination of new interests, new attitudes, and fresh forms produced a body of literature that was strikingly different from the literature of the eighteenth century, but that is not to say that the eighteenth century had no influence on the romantic movement. Practically all of the seeds of the new literary crop had been sown in the preceding century.

The romantic period includes the work of two generations of writers. The first generation was born during the thirty and twenty years preceding 1800; the second generation was born in the last decade of the 1800s. The chief writers of the first generation were Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Southey, Blake, Lamb, and Hazlitt. The essayist Thomas De Quincey, born in 1785, falls between the two generations.

Keats and Shelley belong to the second generation, along with Byron, who was older than they were by a few years. All three were influenced by the work of the writers of the first generation and, ironically, the careers of all three were cut short by death so that the writers of the first generation were still on the literary scene after the writers of the second generation had disappeared. The major writers of the second romantic generation were primarily poets; they produced little prose, outside of their letters. Another striking difference between the two generations is that the writers of the first generation, with the exception of Blake, all gained literary reputations during their lifetime. Of the writers of the second generation, only Byron enjoyed fame while he was alive, more fame than any of the other romantic writers, with perhaps the exception of Scott, but Keats and Shelley had relatively few readers while

they were alive. It was not until the Victorian era that Keats and Shelley became recognized as major romantic poets.

John Keats and His Poetic Oeuvre

JOHN KEATS

Keats is more famous for his odes. But he wrote longer poems like Eve of St. Agnes and others. Let us discuss the various features of Keats' poetry first and then we would be talking about Ode to a Nightingale and Ode to Autumn, two fabulour odes by Keats.

1. The first thing we notice in Keats' poetry is the **Keatsian dualism**. Keats is aware about the inevitable death and decay of all things. However, he seeks some sort of transcendence. He wants to transcend this transitoriness. And conflict arises from this two opposite pulls. Thus, we notice in Keats' poetry the conflict between mortality and immortality, art and reality, transience and permanence etc.
2. Keats proposed the **contemplation of beauty** as a way of delaying the inevitability of death. Although we must die eventually, we can choose to spend our time alive in **aesthetic revelry** looking at beautiful objects and landscape.
3. There are the tropes of departures and reveries. The speaker leaves the real world to explore a transcendental mythical or aesthetic reality. At the end of the poem the speaker returns to his ordinary reality transformed in some way and armed with a new understanding. Often the appearance or contemplation of a beautiful object makes the departure possible. The ability to get lost in a reverie, to depart conscious life to

imaginative life without wondering about plausibility and rationality is part of Keats' concept of negative capability.

4. Keats had fervent faith in the role of **imagination**. Imagination can create beauty which has no a-priori, pre-ordained or pre-given pattern or format. But that imagined beauty is real- in fact more real- because it has no precedence. Consider the lines-

   Eipotheialojwleamadermuktihobe
   Kollolini Kolkata ekdintilottamahobe.

We can imagine a world where there will no class division, no economic division. This is factually incorrect. But this true to me. It is a visionary truth. It can be real later.

5. Keats is celebrated for giving us **concrete, sensuous and synesthetic imagery**. Keats' imagery ranges among all our physical sensations- sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, temperature, weight, pressure, hunger, thirst, sexuality and movement. Keats repeatedly combines different sense in one image i.e. he attributes the trait of one sense to another, a practice called synaesthesia.
6. In Keats' theory of **negative capability** the poet disappears from the work- the work itself chronicles an experience in such a way that the reader recognises and responds to the experience without requiring the intervention or explanation of the poet. Keats' speakers become so enraptured with an object that they erase themselves and their thoughts from the depiction of the object. The speaker becomes indistinguishable from the object described. The poet receives impulses from the world which is full of mystery and doubt which cannot be explained but which the poet can translate into art.

The Texts

Let us now discuss two of the most celebrated odes of odes of Keats- Ode to a Nightingale and Ode to Autumn. But first Ode to a Nightingale:

Ode to a Nightingale

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,

Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Discussion of the Poem

The speaker opens with a declaration of his own heartache. He feels numb, as though he had taken a drug only a moment ago. He is addressing a nightingale he hears singing somewhere in the forest and says that his "drowsy numbness" is not from envy of the nightingale's happiness, but rather from sharing it too completely; he is "too happy" that the nightingale sings the music of summer from amid some unseen plot of green trees and shadows.

In the second stanza, the speaker longs for the oblivion of alcohol, expressing his wish for wine, "a draught of vintage," that would taste like the country and like peasant dances, and let him "leave the world unseen" and disappear into the dim forest with the nightingale. In the third stanza, he explains his desire to fade away, saying he would like to forget the troubles the nightingale has never known: "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" of human life, with its consciousness that everything is mortal and nothing lasts. Youth "grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies," and "beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes."

In the fourth stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale to fly away, and he will follow, not through alcohol ("Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards"), but through poetry, which will give him "viewless wings." He says he is already with the nightingale and describes the forest glade, where even the moonlight is hidden by the trees, except the light that breaks through when the breezes blow the branches. In the fifth stanza, the speaker says that he cannot see the flowers in the glade, but can guess them "in embalmed darkness": white hawthorne, eglantine, violets, and the musk-rose, "the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves." In the sixth stanza, the speaker listens in the dark to the nightingale, saying that he has often been "half in love" with the idea of dying and called Death soft names in many rhymes. Surrounded by the nightingale's song, the speaker thinks that the idea of death seems richer than ever, and he longs to "cease upon the midnight with no pain" while the nightingale pours its soul ecstatically forth. If he were to die, the nightingale would continue to sing, he says, but he would "have ears in vain" and be no longer able to hear.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale that it is immortal, that it was not "born for death." He says that the voice he hears singing has always been heard, by ancient emperors and clowns, by homesick Ruth; he even says the song has often charmed open magic windows looking out over "the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." In the eighth stanza, the word forlorn tolls like a bell to restore the speaker from his preoccupation with the nightingale and back into himself. As the nightingale flies farther away from him, he laments that his imagination has failed him and says that he can no longer recall whether the nightingale's music was "a vision, or a waking dream." Now that the music is gone, the speaker cannot recall whether he himself is awake or asleep.

Form

Like most of the other odes, “Ode to a Nightingale” is written in ten-line stanzas. However, unlike most of the other poems, it is metrically variable—though not so much as “Ode to Psyche.” The first seven and last two lines of each stanza are written in iambic pentameter; the eighth line of each stanza is written in trimeter, with only three accented syllables instead of five. “Nightingale” also differs from the other odes in that its rhyme scheme is the same in every stanza (every other ode varies the order of rhyme in the final three or four lines except “To Psyche,” which has the loosest structure of all the odes). Each stanza in “Nightingale” is rhymed ABABCDECDE, Keats’s most basic scheme throughout the odes.

Themes

With “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats’s speaker begins his fullest and deepest exploration of the themes of creative expression and the mortality of human life. In this ode, the transience of life and the tragedy of old age (“where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies”) is set against the eternal renewal of the nightingale’s fluid music (“Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!”). The speaker reprises the “drowsy numbness” he experienced in “Ode on Indolence,” but where in “Indolence” that numbness was a sign of disconnection from experience, in “Nightingale” it is a sign of too full a connection: “being too happy in thine happiness,” as the speaker tells the nightingale. Hearing the song of the nightingale, the speaker longs to flee the human world and join the bird. His first thought is to reach the bird’s state through alcohol—in the second stanza, he longs for a “draught of vintage” to transport him out of himself. But after his meditation in the third stanza on the transience of life, he rejects the idea of being “charioted by Bacchus and his pards” (Bacchus was the Roman god of wine and was supposed to have been carried by a chariot pulled by leopards) and chooses instead to

embrace, for the first time since he refused to follow the figures in “Indolence,” “the viewless wings of Poesy.”

The rapture of poetic inspiration matches the endless creative rapture of the nightingale’s music and lets the speaker, in stanzas five through seven, imagine himself with the bird in the darkened forest. The ecstatic music even encourages the speaker to embrace the idea of dying, of painlessly succumbing to death while enraptured by the nightingale’s music and never experiencing any further pain or disappointment. But when his meditation causes him to utter the word “forlorn,” he comes back to himself, recognizing his fancy for what it is—an imagined escape from the inescapable (“Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf”). As the nightingale flies away, the intensity of the speaker’s experience has left him shaken, unable to remember whether he is awake or asleep.

In “Indolence,” the speaker rejected all artistic effort. In “Psyche,” he was willing to embrace the creative imagination, but only for its own internal pleasures. But in the nightingale’s song, he finds a form of outward expression that translates the work of the imagination into the outside world, and this is the discovery that compels him to embrace Poesy’s “viewless wings” at last. The “art” of the nightingale is endlessly changeable and renewable; it is music without record, existing only in a perpetual present. As befits his celebration of music, the speaker’s language, sensually rich though it is, serves to suppress the sense of sight in favor of the other senses. He can imagine the light of the moon, “But here there is no light”; he knows he is surrounded by flowers, but he “cannot see what flowers” are at his feet. This suppression will find its match in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which is in many ways a companion poem to “Ode to a Nightingale.” In the later poem, the speaker will finally confront a created art-object not subject to any of the limitations of time; in “Nightingale,” he

has achieved creative expression and has placed his faith in it, but that expression—the nightingale's song—is spontaneous and without physical manifestation.

TO AUTUMN

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

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
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 oozings 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.

Discussion of the Poem

Keats's speaker opens his first stanza by addressing Autumn, describing its abundance and its intimacy with the sun, with whom Autumn ripens fruits and causes the late flowers to bloom. In the second stanza, the speaker describes the figure of Autumn as a female goddess, often seen sitting on the granary floor, her hair "soft-lifted" by the wind, and often seen sleeping in the fields or watching a cider-press squeezing the juice from apples. In the third stanza, the speaker tells Autumn not to wonder where the songs of spring have gone, but instead to listen to her own music. At twilight, the "small gnats" hum among the "the river sallows," or willow trees, lifted and dropped by the wind, and "full-grown lambs" bleat from the hills, crickets sing, robins whistle from the garden, and swallows, gathering for their coming migration, sing from the skies.

Form

Like the "Ode on Melancholy," "To Autumn" is written in a three-stanza structure with a variable rhyme scheme. Each stanza is eleven lines long (as opposed to ten in "Melancholy", and each is metered in a relatively precise iambic pentameter. In terms of both thematic organization and rhyme scheme, each stanza is divided roughly into two parts. In each stanza, the first part is made up of the first four lines of the stanza, and the second part is made up of the last seven lines. The first part of each stanza follows an ABAB rhyme scheme, the first

line rhyming with the third, and the second line rhyming with the fourth. The second part of each stanza is longer and varies in rhyme scheme: The first stanza is arranged CDEDCCE, and the second and third stanzas are arranged CDECDDE. (Thematically, the first part of each stanza serves to define the subject of the stanza, and the second part offers room for musing, development, and speculation on that subject; however, this thematic division is only very general.)

Themes

In both its form and descriptive surface, "To Autumn" is one of the simplest of Keats's odes. There is nothing confusing or complex in Keats's paean to the season of autumn, with its fruitfulness, its flowers, and the song of its swallows gathering for migration. The extraordinary achievement of this poem lies in its ability to suggest, explore, and develop a rich abundance of themes without ever ruffling its calm, gentle, and lovely description of autumn. Where "Ode on Melancholy" presents itself as a strenuous heroic quest, "To Autumn" is concerned with the much quieter activity of daily observation and appreciation. In this quietude, the gathered themes of the preceding odes find their fullest and most beautiful expression.

"To Autumn" takes up where the other odes leave off. Like the others, it shows Keats's speaker paying homage to a particular goddess—in this case, the deified season of Autumn. The selection of this season implicitly takes up the other odes' themes of temporality, mortality, and change: Autumn in Keats's ode is a time of warmth and plenty, but it is perched on the brink of winter's desolation, as the bees enjoy "later flowers," the harvest is gathered from the fields, the lambs of spring are now "full grown," and, in the final line of the poem, the swallows gather for their winter migration. The understated sense of inevitable

loss in that final line makes it one of the most moving moments in all of poetry; it can be read as a simple, uncomplaining summation of the entire human condition.

Despite the coming chill of winter, the late warmth of autumn provides Keats's speaker with ample beauty to celebrate: the cottage and its surroundings in the first stanza, the agrarian haunts of the goddess in the second, and the locales of natural creatures in the third. Keats's speaker is able to experience these beauties in a sincere and meaningful way because of the lessons he has learned in the previous odes: He is no longer indolent, no longer committed to the isolated imagination (as in "Psyche"), no longer attempting to escape the pain of the world through ecstatic rapture (as in "Nightingale"), no longer frustrated by the attempt to eternalize mortal beauty or subject eternal beauty to time (as in "Urn"), and no longer able to frame the connection of pleasure and the sorrow of loss only as an imaginary heroic quest (as in "Melancholy").

In "To Autumn," the speaker's experience of beauty refers back to earlier odes (the swallows recall the nightingale; the fruit recalls joy's grape; the goddess drowsing among the poppies recalls Psyche and Cupid lying in the grass), but it also recalls a wealth of earlier poems. Most importantly, the image of Autumn winnowing and harvesting (in a sequence of odes often explicitly about creativity) recalls an earlier Keats poem in which the activity of harvesting is an explicit metaphor for artistic creation. In his sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be," Keats makes this connection directly:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactry,
Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain...

In this poem, the act of creation is pictured as a kind of self-harvesting; the pen harvests the fields of the brain, and books are filled with the resulting “grain.” In “To Autumn,” the metaphor is developed further; the sense of coming loss that permeates the poem confronts the sorrow underlying the season’s creativity. When Autumn’s harvest is over, the fields will be bare, the swaths with their “twined flowers” cut down, the cider-press dry, the skies empty. But the connection of this harvesting to the seasonal cycle softens the edge of the tragedy. In time, spring will come again, the fields will grow again, and the birdsong will return. As the speaker knew in “Melancholy,” abundance and loss, joy and sorrow, song and silence are as intimately connected as the twined flowers in the fields. What makes “To Autumn” beautiful is that it brings an engagement with that connection out of the realm of mythology and fantasy and into the everyday world. The development the speaker so strongly resisted in “Indolence” is at last complete: He has learned that an acceptance of mortality is not destructive to an appreciation of beauty and has gleaned wisdom by accepting the passage of time.