UNIT 15  JOHN KEATS

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

• Write about John Keats’s life and work;
• Discuss Keats’s poetry in detail with special reference to:
  i) ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’
  ii) ‘Ode to a Nightingale’

15.1 INTRODUCTION

John Keats was born in London, to Thomas and Frances Jennings Keats, on 31 October, 1795. Neither of his parents, nor any of his family members exhibited any taste for art. Thus, parentage threw no light on his poetic genius. He was educated at a private school at Enfield because of his parent’s poor financial condition. As a young lad Keats showed no intellectual interest and was known for fighting with people and is estimated as a morbid hysterical youth. At the age of fourteen he gave in to books. When he was of age fifteen, his parents died and his guardians took him from school and apprenticed him to a surgeon. In 1814 he transferred his residence to London, and followed part of the regular course of instruction for medical students. Already, however, his poetical bent of mind was becoming apparent. Surgery lost its slight attraction and giving up all thoughts of a medical career, he devoted himself to literature. The career of a poet became a bright possibility when he got acquainted with Leigh Hunt (1816), the famous Radical journalist and poet, whose collisions with the Government had caused much commotion and his own imprisonment. Keats was soon intimate with the Radical brotherhood that surrounded Leigh Hunt, and thus he became known to Shelley and others. Keats was in circle where great spirits flourished. Wordsworth, Lamb and Leigh met the young enthusiast and each in his own way
John Keats

At the age of seventeen, John Keats became acquainted with the works of Spenser when he read “Faerie Queen” which was given to him by his friend Cowden Clarke and this proved to be the turning point in his life. The mannerisms of the Elizabethan poet immediately captivated him, and he resolved to imitate him. His earliest attempt at verse is his *Imitation of Spenser* (1813), written when he was eighteen. This and some other short pieces were published together in his *Poems* (1817), his first volume of verse. This book contains little of any outstanding merit, except for some of its sonnets, which include the superb *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*. While on one hand we can say that Spenser had been Keats’ first enchanter, the second being Homer; on the other he owed much to Leigh Hunt for wise and generous encouragement and direction. The poems, which include *Sleep and Poetry* and *I stood tip toe upon a little hill*, show the influence of Spenser and more immediately, of Leigh Hunt, to whom the volume was dedicated.

Of a different quality was his next volume, called Endymion (1818). Probably based partly on Drayton’s *The Man in the Moon* and Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess*, this remarkable poem of Endymion professes to tell the story of the lovely youth who was kissed by the moon goddess on the summit of Mount Latmos. Keats develops this simple myth into an intricate and flowery and rather obscure allegory of over four thousand lines. The work is clearly immature, and flawed with many weaknesses both of taste and of construction, but many of the passages are the most beautiful, and the poem shows the tender budding of the Keatsian style- a rich and suggestive beauty obtained by a richly ornamented diction. However the crudeness of the work laid it open to attack and the hostile reviews found it an easy prey.
Among his shorter poems *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, a kind of lyrical ballad, is considered to be one of the choicest in the language.

In 1819 Keats collaborated in a drama, *Otho the Great*, and began another, *King Stephen*, which he did not complete. Neither effort is of much consequence. *The Cap and Bells*, a longish fairy-tale which also is unfinished, is much below the level of his usual work.

Intellectually Keats was strongly in sympathy with Shelly and Byron in terms of religious philosophy he was much more extreme and whole heartedly pagan than either. For Keats there was no other religion than the religion of beauty; for him the earth was his great consoler. He never let is political inclination effect his poetry.

Compton- Rickett is of the view that “where Wordsworth spiritualizes and Shelly intellectualizes Nature, Keats is content to express her through the senses: the colour, the scent, the touch, the pulsing music.”

### 15.3 ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

#### 15.3.1 The Background of the Poem

Keats was a romantic poet and where in most of his poems we find the solace of romance in this poem Keats has changed it to the solace of art. The theme of Ode on a Grecian Urn is about the attempt to escape from the complexities of time and escape into the world of unchanging art although it is achieved at a certain price. It considers the arresting of time and life by art as both profit and loss—it represents the escape from change and decay into eternity, but at the expense of eternal fulfillment: the “unravished bride” remains forever between the wedding ceremony and the bridal bed, as it were. Beauty and permanence remain with the figures on the urn, but they are after all only an “Attic shape”, and “attitude”, a “cold pastoral”.

#### 15.3.2 The Text

**Ode on a Grecian Urn**

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

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

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! withbrede
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.”

Glossary

Tempe : valley in Thessaly
Arcady : a region of ancient Greece, but primarily a vision of the pastoral ideal
Sensual
And . . . return : The “little town” is not on the urn but exists only in the implication of art
Attic : pertaining to Attica, i.e. Athens
Brede : embroidery
Tease...thought: as in the “epistle of John Hamilton Reynolds” l. 77
Beauty...know: there has been much critical controversy as to where Keats intended the quotation to end: I follow Douglas Bush in assigning the entire last two lines (ll. 49-50) to the urn, and not just the first five words of l. 49.

15.3.3 The Discussion

The poem is both to and on a Grecian Urn as the poet is both talking ‘to the Urn’ by addressing it as a bride while it is ‘on the urn’ because the poet is detailing about the pictures drawn on the urn. The poet addresses the urn and calls it the bride of quietness and the child of silence and slow time as if it is wedded for ever to quietness and also it is unchanged or unchangeable because a piece of art is a permanent thing. So the bride is ‘still unravished’. In this poem, the poet believes that the pictures on the urn are frozen in time therefore they will never change or come to an end.

In the first stanza, the speaker stands before an ancient Grecian urn and addresses it. He is preoccupied with its depiction of pictures frozen in time. It is the “still unravish’d bride of quietness,” the “foster-child of silence and slow time.” The bride who is unravished will never consummate her love thus would never fulfill that desire. But a spark of wanting would remain forever. Addressing the bride as unravished could also mean that she is the one who has not been tainted with impurities. He also describes the urn as a “Sylvian historian” who can tell a story. He believes that this historian can tell a story in a much better way than any poet. He wonders about the figures on the side of the urn and asks what legend they depict and from where have they come. The picture seems to show a group of men chasing a group of women in the forest. The scene is such that it is hard for the poet to understand that what could be happening. He wonders what could be their story and asks questions like: “What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?”

Looking at another picture on the urn, the speaker talks about a young man playing a pipe and is lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker calls the music as the “unheard” melodies because they can never be heard but still he tries to listen to them and he believes that they are sweeter than mortal melodies as they are unaffected by time. As the song in the picture would never end; the trees would never shed their leaves and it would always be spring. 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.

In the following lines, the poet talks about the surroundings that are feeling happy. The trees will never shed their leaves, the songs of the piper will be “forever new,” and 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.” Therefore, everyone in the picture is happy as there is no fear of losing. Nothing would fade away. The picture on the urn is timeless. Evil has not been introduced. It is not affected by the cycle of life where everything deteriorates.

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 and from
where have they come. The scene is probably of an animal sacrifice. He imagines a little town there, empty of all its inhabitants for this purpose and he believes the streets will forever remain empty and silent, for those who have left it will never return as it is a picture and pictures are static in time. The final stanza, contains the beauty-truth equation, the speaker again addresses the urn itself, saying that it, like Eternity, “doth tease us out of thought.” Through the poet’s imagination, the urn has been able to preserve a temporary and happy condition in permanence, but it cannot do the same for the poets and their generation. As old age will waste everything and bring them grief. He thinks that when his generation would be long lost in time, the urn will remain, telling future generations its story. He believes that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” The speaker says that this is the only thing the urn knows and the only thing it needs to know. This may also indicate that this is the only thing we know on earth as there is more to know after the life on this earth comes to an end.

Thus to summarize, it can be said that in the poem the poet is trying to show that “human life and happiness may be brief, yet art may enshrine them with an ideal beauty that outlives the years. The figures and all they symbolized are gone but art has given them a lasting durability and so links the ages together”.
(Compton-Ricket 1989)

15.4 ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

15.4.1 The Background of the Poem

Ode to a Nightingale is generally admired for its rich and slow moving verse and for its expression of what are considered to be emotions proper to romantic poetry. But its true merits are of higher kind, deriving from its treatment of the nightingale’s song as symbol of the timeless, of the escape from the world of change and decay. The relation between art, death and life is the true theme of the poem as it is of the Ode on a Grecian Urn. The poem portrays Keats’ speaker’s engagement with the fluid expressiveness of music and has a different flavor of romanticism.

15.4.2 The Text

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 thy 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
Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sun-burnt 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 tomorrow.

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,
Clustered 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 covered 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,
Called 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
Charmed 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 famed 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?

Glossary

**Lethe**, a river flowing from the Greek underworld; it’s also known as the river of forgetfulness, for those who drink from it forget everything. The allusion coincides with one of the themes of the poem, Keats’ desire to forget everything as he listens to a bird sing, or as he writes poetry.

**Light-winged Dryad of the trees** In Greek Mythology, Dryads are the female spirits of nature (nymphs) who preside over forests and groves. The two mythological references establish a surreal mood—that state between reality and dreaming perhaps. This supports the theme that the poet wants to escape reality, and does.

**Draught of vintage that hath been / Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth / tasting of Flora and the country greenis Hippocrene.** In Greek Mythology, Hippocrene is the name of a fountain on Mt. Helicon. It was sacred to the Muses and was formed by the hooves of Pegasus. Drinking the fountain’s water brings forth poetic inspiration.

**That I might drink, and leave the world unseen / And with thee fade away into the forest dim”** Thee in this citation refers to the nightingale.

**Not charioted by Bacchus... / but on the viewless wings of Poesy** the depressed speaker wishes to escape through poetry. Bacchus is an allusion to the Roman god of wine and revelry.

**Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— / To thy high requiem become a sod.** The problem with dying is the poet would no longer be able to listen to the nightingale’s song.
Forlorn snaps the poet out of his trance. The nightingale has flown and the poet wonders “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?”

15.4.3 A Discussion

The speaker feels a pain at heart and opens with a declaration of his own heartache. He feels a kind of uneasy drowsiness as if he is drunk. But his condition is not because he is envious of the nightingale whom he hears singing somewhere in the forest and says that it is not due to the bird’s happiness, but is rather from sharing the experience wholly. The happiness is from the Nightingale’s singing as it sings the music of summer from amid some unseen plot of green trees and shadows.

The song of the nightingale seems to have paralyzed the poet’s mind as he wants to give up his senses and be one with the nightingale. For this, he longs for a drop of alcohol, so that he could experience the feeling completely and escape from reality. He wants to exist as one with the bird and forget all the pains and sorrow of this world. The poet longs for wings like Nightingale as it would help him see the world from a different height. He desires to fade away, saying he would like to forget the troubles the nightingale has never known. It doesn’t know the pains of human life and truth that everything is mortal. It doesn’t know that youth gets pale and that beauty loses its charm as time flies; it doesn’t know that life is full of sorrow and misery.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker asks the nightingale to fly away, and he will follow, not with the help of alcohol, but through his poetry, which will give him unseen wings. He doesn’t need alcohol as his spirits would lead him. He can see the moon and the stars although there is just a glimmer. This is because he is lifted above the trees along with the nightingale. In the fifth stanza, although the poet loses his sight but he can sense life into everything as he can smell, taste and hear a new world around him. It seems to him as if he has entered a totally new paradise.

In the sixth stanza, the speaker confesses that he is “half in love” with the idea of dying and believes that Death is soft. He wants and easeful death and enter a new world with the nightingale. He wants to experience that richness from a new height. But he soon realizes that the life of imagination and reality is different and if he would die, the nightingale would continue to sing but he would “have ears in vain” and be no longer able to hear.

In the following lines, the speaker tells the nightingale that it is immortal that it was not “born for death.” Nightingale’s song is eternal and its voice has always been heard by people from the past i.e. by ancient emperors and clowns, by homesick Ruth, whose reference we can find in the Old Testament also heard it. And it can be heard in the present times and would continue to be heard in future. The song has often charmed open magic windows. In the final stanza, the word forlorn tolls like a bell to restore the speaker from his preoccupation with the nightingale and back into him. The realization of the actual world makes him disheartened as the imaginary world is now shattered. As the nightingale flies away, he wakes up from his dream. He realizes that it was his imagination or maybe he has come out from his sleep. But he also realizes that what he was thinking is not possible and that he should come back to his senses.
Thus, here we find one of the main themes of the poem where he is conflicting between reality and the ideal. In this poem we can see that Keats has allowed his thought to have wings and be free and get rid from the life of frustration. One though leads to another but finally he comes back to reality and realizes the truth of life.

15.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the life and works of John Keats and examined two of his poems. Both of them are romantic poems addressing things of beauty in nature and in the creation of man. You should now be able to examine, appreciate and discuss Keats’s poetry in general and these two poems in particular effectively.

15.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Now that you have read the poems carefully, try to answer the following questions. And thus you would discuss the poems

a) Talk about the life and important works of Keats.
   \textbf{Ans:} Refer to section 15.1 and 15.2

b) What do you think Keats mean by a Sylvan historian in the first stanza of Ode on a Grecian Urn?
   \textbf{Ans:} Refer to the second paragraph of Section 15.3.3.

c) Discuss how the poet defines art to be eternal?
   \textbf{Ans:} Refer to the fourth, fifth and final paragraph of Section 15.3.3.

d) How will the poet follow the Nightingale when it flies away in the poem \textit{Ode to a Nightingale}?
   \textbf{Ans:} Refer to the second paragraph of the section 15.4.3

e) Why does the poet become disheartened in the poem Ode to Nightingale?
   \textbf{Ans:} Refer to the second last paragraphs of Sections 15.4.4

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