The Romantic Poets
III

The Romantic Poets

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats
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THE ROMANTIC POETS

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13 Prof. Amiya Bhushan Sharma, SOH, IGNOU
14 Dr. Saryu Yadav, NCERT
15 Dr. Om Prakash, Gautam Buddha University

Print Production

Mr. C.N. Pandey
Section Officer (Publication)
SOH, IGNOU, New Delhi

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INTRODUCTION TO BLOCK 3
POETRY OF THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In Block II you read about a period of English literature that was influenced by classicism, the artistic principles developed in ancient Greece and Rome. In this block you are going to read the literature of Romanticism ‘an innovatory aesthetic creed, as opposed to an orthodox art.’ The literature of the previous period, in spite of Methodism in the religious life of the nation and the rise of ‘Sensibility’ in the realm of culture, was governed by the values of the ‘old order’ or the ‘ancien régime’, as the French would have it. The ancien régime in France supported the opulence of the nobility and the clergy at the cost of the Third Estate, the common people, who stooped in poverty but paid for the other two - the nobility and the clergy - in various ways. This disparity of wealth, income and opportunity characterized life and society of Europe including that of England.

In this block you move from the peace of the Augustans to an era of Revolutions – American in 1776 and the French in 1789. ‘Intense emotion’ opine Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, ‘coupled with an intense display of imagery, such is the frame of mind which supports and feeds the new literature.’ We can observe these new tendencies in the poetries of the most eminent Robert Burns (1759-’96), William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), S.T. Coleridge (1802-’52), George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), P.B. Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821).

Burns was born into a poor Scottish family and led a precarious existence as a farmer. For some time his financial and domestic problems were so acute that he considered emigrating to Jamaica but he wrote vigorously in 1785-86 and the publication of his Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect (1786) was an immediate success. Henry Mackenzie (1745 - 1831) the author of The Man of Feeling (1771), which Burns valued ‘next to the Bible’, called him ‘a heaven-taught ploughman’. In his youth, ‘Burns was the god of my idolatry’ admitted Charles Lamb (1775 - 1834). Burns was an extremely handsome person and temperamentally gregarious which led him into a life of dissipation and amorous complexity. Many of his women find mention in his poems: Alison Begbie in ‘Mary Morison’, Mary Campbell in ‘To Mary in Heaven’. Some of his well known poems are, ‘The Cotters Saturday Night’, ‘To a Mouse’, ‘To a Mountain Daisy’, ‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’, ‘Auld Lang Syne’ and of course ‘Tam O’Shanter’ (1791). The last poem narrates in a mock-heroic fashion Tam’s journey home from drinking. On his way he encounters a witches’ dance and flees. His mare loses her tail in the chase forcing Tam to draw the moral that when one’s thoughts turn to alcohol and sexual indulgence, ‘Think, ye may buy the joys o’er dear, / Remember Tam O’ Shanter’s mare.’ You may study and discuss the life and poems of Robert Burns or any other topic of interest to you in your study group.

William Blake did not go to school but began his career as an apprentice to James Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries. (An engraver cuts designs and letters on hard surfaces such as wood or metal.) He later went to the Royal Academy and at the age of 22 he was employed as an engraver by Joseph
Johnson, a radical publisher and bookseller at St. Paul’s Churchyard in London. He held literary dinners over his shop where his guests included Henry Fuseli, a Swiss artist who came to England in 1764 and settled in London, William Godwin, an atheist and philosopher of anarchical views, Joseph Priestley discoverer of oxygen and a radical Dissenter and Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man* and an upholder of the politics of the Enlightenment. At Joseph’s Blake met Fuseli and John Flaxman (1755-1826) English neo-classical sculptor and draughtsman. The latter was a follower of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a theosophist and mystic who claimed not only to have visions but also converse with angels in his waking life. Blake’s works both as an engraver and poet were influenced by Swedenborg’s mysticism.

Historians of English literature have often called Blake and Burns Pre-Romantics, an epithet that better suits Thomas Gray and William Cowper, Macpherson and Percy. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Robert Southey (1774-1843) the first generation of the Romantic poets are frequently described as the Lake Poets. Byron, Shelley and Keats belong to the second generation of the romantic poets. John Gibson Lockhart today remembered for his *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (his father-in-law), was as editor (1825-53) of *The Quarterly Review* better known for the name given to himself: ‘The scorpion’. He was savage as a critic and in the *Blackwood’s Magazine* he and his associates began a scathing attack ‘On the Cockney School of Poetry’. Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt and John Keats, all Londoners, were frequently derided for their humble origin and contrasted with great writers, all of whom were ‘men of some rank’. To the reviewers the younger poets were ‘the vilest vermin’ and people of ‘extreme moral depravity’. We have selected works of only five poets of the Romantic period for some detailed study. I hope you will enjoy reading them and discussing them in your study circle.

Amiya Bhushan Sharma
UNIT 11 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Structure

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

• Talk and write about Wordsworth the poet;
• Discuss Wordsworth’s poetry with special reference to ‘Intimations of Immortality’ and
• ‘Tintern Abbey’

11.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we have discussed William Wordsworth’s life in brief. He is regarded the greatest poet of Nature and also the foremost of the Romantic poets. He brought about a revolutionary change in English poetry by his language, his sense of the influence of Nature on the mind, and his insight into emotion.

The first poem is an extract from ‘Intimations of Immortality’ which can also be termed as autobiography in poetry. Wordsworth talks about how memories recollected in tranquillity / calmness strengthen and inspire us if we remain true to Nature. We have scanned five lines of the poem. You may practice scansion by scanning the rest of the poem.

The second poem is also an extract from ‘Tintern Abbey’. It contains the essence of Wordsworth’s thought as a poet. The extract discusses how Nature soothes and heals a mind and heart in turmoil.
Both the poems are representatives of Wordsworth’s theory of poetry: “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity.”

After going through the unit, we hope, you would be able to appreciate the fact that Wordsworth was the poet of Man, of ‘man as they are men within themselves.’ He celebrates both ‘Nature in her modesty’ and ‘Nature in her sublimity’.

It is better if you read through the unit section by section and do the exercises as you read. Do give yourself a break after you have worked on a section.

### 11.2 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)

Wordsworth along with Coleridge and Southey belonged to the first generation of the Romantic poets.

Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770 at Cockermouth on the Derwent in the Cumberland highlands of Lake District. By the age of fourteen he had become an orphan. His school days at Hawkshead, in his own words, “were very happy one, chiefly because I was left at liberty then, and in the vacations, to read whatever books I liked.” Here he received his early impression “derived neither from books nor from companions, but from the majesty and loveliness of scenes around him… loved with the first heats of youth.” He spent his first summer vacation at Hawkshead where “after a night spent in dancing, I was deeply moved by a splendid sunrise.” Speaking of this experience, he says in *The Prelude*:

> Ah! need I say, dear friend! that to the brim
> My heart was full: I made no vows, but vows
> Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
> Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
> A dedicated spirit.

But he did not relish the petty restrictions of University life and atmosphere of St. John’s College, Cambridge, and felt like “a fowl of the air, ill-tutored for captivity.” His days at the University are well documented in *The Prelude*.

After obtaining his B.A. degree in 1791, Wordsworth went to live for some months in London where the multitudes of the huge city brought him a vision of totality – human sympathies into his thoughts of Nature – and made him recognize “the unity of man,” the unity of life.

In 1791 Wordsworth went to France to learn French in order to fulfil his cherished idea of becoming a touring tutor. There, like so many of his generation, he was very enthusiastic about the Revolution of 1789 and the revolutionaries. In particular he was charmed by the personality of Michael de Beaupuis whom he met at Blois in 1792. His influence revealed to him the power and potentiality of man - to attain “rational liberty, and hope in Mind, Justice and peace.” At Blois he fell in love with Annette Vallon. He did not marry her, but she bore him a daughter.

He was compelled to return to England because his guardians in England threatened to cut off his allowances. The next few years were a period of
disillusionment and disappointment for him. He was filled with remorse on account of his desertion of Annette and the child. Besides, the violent course of events in France rudely shattered his dreams of a new world of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity – the ideals of the French Revolution. Further, the war between France and England divided his loyalties in the most agonizing way.

His stay at Racedown, Somerset, between 1795 and 1797 is significant because he gradually overcame the depression and disillusionment caused by the French Revolution. Here he wrote ‘Guilt and Sorrow’ and his only drama The Borderers, a tragedy in blank verse, both being attempt at the psychology of guilt and expiation.

In 1797, Wordsworth along with his sister, Dorothy, moved to Alfoxden to be near to S.T. Coleridge, whose genius for philosophical speculation offered him an intellectual companionship that answered his needs. Here the two greats thought of embarking upon a book of poems to meet the expenses of a walking tour of Germany. Their joint venture resulted in the publication of the remarkable and monumental The Lyrical Ballads for which ‘Tintern Abbey’ was composed. The Lyrical Ballads was a manifesto of a new spirit in poetry we know as the Romantic Revival. Among the notes of new poetry were a new and intenser interest in Nature, and a new faith in Man. In this period he wrote some of his best poems like ‘Ruth’, ‘Nutting’, ‘The Poet’s Epitaph’ and the Lucy poems like ‘The Idiot Boy’, ‘A Slumber did my Spirit Seal’, ‘She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Way’, ‘The Education of Nature’, etc. This period also saw the publication of ‘Peter Bell’, a poem written as a reply to Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Like Coleridge’s poem, this poem is also about the redemption of human soul.

In the beginning of 1800, with Dorothy, he settled at Dove cottage, Grasmere. In October 1802, he married Mary Hutchinson. In the following lines from ‘She was a Phantom of Delight’ he describes her thus:

“The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength and skill;
A perfect woman, nobly planned,
To warm, to comfort, and command.”

Here he planned his great philosophical poem The Recluse in three parts, of which he was able to write only two parts: The Prelude by way of introduction and the second part, The Excursion. In 1813, he settled at his favourite place Rydal Mount where he died on April 23, 1850, and was buried in the Grasmere churchyard. In the meantime, in 1843, he was appointed the Poet-laureate in succession to Robert Southey (1774-1843).

11.2.1 Characteristics of his Poetry

Every critic of English poetry has come to the conclusion that Wordsworth is the greatest Nature poet of England. Indeed, after reading his poetry, we are moved deeply and experience a kind of calm pleasure. To him, like the mystics, Nature was not a mere physical entity or loveliness or a sensuous presentation and description, but revelation of the Supreme Being; a vision, an interpretation, a path to perception of the unseen and infinite as both the poems here selected show. To him the myriad forms and phenomena in the universe were the
manifestations of the divine – to him God in Man and in Nature is one as the super-sensuous world appeared to be more real than the world of sense-perception.

One cardinal principle of his poetry is his love for human beings – to love Nature is to love Man who is part and parcel of Nature. A distinguishing feature of this belief in Man is his glorification of childhood, of which the ‘Intimations of Immortality’ is the supreme example.

Another characteristic of his poetry is that Nature is a great teacher, healer and soother. In the ‘Tables Turned’ he says:

“One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man;
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.”

But to learn lessons from Nature one must “bring with a heart /That watches and receives.”

His attitude to Nature did not become mystical and spiritual all at once. There were three stages in this development and they are described very vividly in the ‘Tintern Abbey’ and the ‘Immortality Ode’. In the first stage, his love of Nature was like that of child – sheer animal delight in the freshness and beauty of natural objects. This, in the second stage, developed into an impassioned love and sensuous beauty of Nature. In the third stage these passions, joys and raptures of youth yielded place to a quieter and more sober approach in which he became aware of the spiritual and human significance of Nature. He realized that Nature was the abode of God, and that there was an indissoluble bond between Nature, Man and God. This realization filled him with universal love and faith that all God’s creation is full of His blessings.

11.2.2 His Theory of Poetry

Wordsworth elaborated his theory of poetry in his Preface to The Lyrical Ballads. He writes:

“I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.” But adds:

“Though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, has also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feelings are modified and directed by our thought, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings.”

In his view, sensibility alone was not sufficient to ensure good poetry; it must be directed by “thought long and deep,” i.e. by a calm mind.

What Wordsworth implies is, to quote Herbert Read, that “good poetry is never an immediate reaction to the provoking cause; that our sensations must be
allowed time to sink back into the common fund of our experiences, there to find their level and due proportion. That level is found for them by the mind in the act of contemplation, and then in the process of contemplation the sensation revive, and out of the union of contemplating mind and the receiving sensibility, rises that unique mode of expression which we call poetry.” This is what Wordsworth means when he asserts that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity”- a product which provides ‘pleasure’ and ‘delight’, the purpose being ‘instruction through pleasure’. Wordsworth’s theory of poetry is rooted in his ideas of a poet as a ‘man speaking to men’ who reveals to his fellow beings the hidden unity of their experiences. The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of people and therefore his language is very akin to theirs.

He writes in The Lyrical Ballads: “Low rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated…. The language too of these men is adopted…because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived….”

Wordsworth in this way discarded the abstract and frigid style of the 18th century poetry in order to find a suitable language for the new poetic movement.

Do you find Wordsworth’s life and his creed interesting? If you do, you will find a longer introduction in any History of English Literature.

Now find out how well you have read and understood the section with the help of the following exercise. In case you fail to locate the answers, read the whole section again.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-check Exercise I</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) How old was Wordsworth when he became an orphan?</td>
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<td>2) From where did Wordsworth receive his Bachelor’s degree?</td>
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<td>3) Wordsworth wrote The Lyrical Ballads in collaboration with</td>
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<td>................. and was first published in ...............................................</td>
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<td>4) Name Wordsworth’s sister and wife.</td>
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<td>5) Wordsworth succeeded ................................................. as poet-laureate</td>
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<td>of England in the year .................................................................</td>
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11.3 INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

11.3.1 The Background of the Poem

The full title of the present poem is ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood’. The poem is in eleven stanzas containing 204 lines. The present extract is stanza IX.

Partly composed in 1802 and partly in 1804, ‘Intimations of Immortality’ is one of the noblest poems of Wordsworth. Around the year 1802 the poet was facing a spiritual crisis. The ‘visionary experiences’ that he had come across as an adolescent and a young man, and which were the source of his ‘deepest illumination’ were gradually losing their shine and glory. The present poem gives expression to the poet’s spiritual crisis, the causes of the lost glory and an answer to the poet’s problem.

C.M. Bowra in The Romantic Imagination observes that the first part (sts. I-IV) presents the crisis, the second (sts. V-VIII) attempts an explanation, the third and concluding part (sts. IX-XI) offers a consolation. Though “the radiance … once so bright” is no more, yet all is not lost; Nature will still ‘uphold’ and ‘cherish’ us is the message that the poem conveys.

11.3.2 The Text

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed perpetual benedictions:
Not indeed for that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:
Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised;
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy.
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
Hence, in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Glossary

ember : ashes; remnant of his former being
doth : still
fugitive : of fleeting nature
breed : create; perpetuate
Perpetual : ever; constant
benediction : thankfulness to God; thanks giving
most : very thanks for
blest : given
simple : innocent
creed : faith
rest : contentment
new-fledged : young hope
fluttering : move lightly and quickly
breast : heart
blank misgivings : vague doubts about the reality of objects
affection : love, impression
shadowy : vague
fountain light : the real source of our knowledge
master light : the chief source of light
Uphold : support
eternal : without beginning or end; existing for ever; frequent
listlessness : indifference
high instincts : lofty ideas / institutions
Man : manhood
Boy : boyhood
sea : previous existence with God
land : earthy life
11.3.3 The Stanza Form

‘Intimations of Immortality’ is written in an English Pindaric of the irregular form. This form is also known as Cowleyan ode. Wordsworth had never tried such a metre before. Each stanza has its own shape and length, and its own rhyme-scheme.

The first four lines are scanned for you.

/     /      /
O joy ! / that in / our em / bers
/     /       /
Is some / thing that / doth live,
/     /     /
That na / ture yet / remem / bers
/     /     /
What was / so fu / gitive !

This passage is an example of Iambic verse.

Variations : The first four lines are Trimetre. The first and third lines are hypermetrical. These four lines are rhymed and the rhyme scheme is a b a b.

11.3.4 A Discussion

The poem is a reminiscence in the sense that it is a poetic account of immortal nature of the human spirit intuitively known by the child, almost forgotten by the grown-up man, but to be known through recollection in tranquillity of heart and mind.

In this extract, the poet considers the child as superior to the grown-up man in the spiritual perception of divinity. But it is indeed a joy that even in our mature age, we can recall and recollect the elusive visions – the feeling of immortality and heavenly life – experienced during our childhood. In the same breath, the poet makes it clear that his joys in recollecting those experiences is not due to the blessings of childhood, delight and liberty, rather he is full of gratefulness and thanks “for those obstinate questions of sense and outward things,” i.e., the poet is not thankful for those blessings for which he should feel most grateful. Our maturity force us to question and doubt the existence of tangible objects of the world around us, the vague intimations of the existence of a world of spirit and the natural instincts as experienced during the childhood. During the childhood period he had doubts about the reality of the visible world in which he moved about. The material things seemed to move away from him, and vanish into unreality. But as a grown-up man he feels like a guilty person, for now his life is devoid of the former loftiness. He is grateful to that period because of those innocent feelings and those vague remembrances of a previous existence in heaven which have always been a source of joy. Whatever may be their ultimate cause and effect, they are the primary source of knowledge, wisdom and happiness. These memories / recollection strengthen and inspire us. As a result the years of troubled and noisy times spent in the world are after all just transitory moments in this vast eternity. They support us, sustain us, and have the power to convert the noise and fury of our life into an eternal calm and serenity, i.e., they are capable of making our troubled period appear to us like a
momentary interval of disturbance placed between tranquil eternity of life before birth and after death.

The poet believes that once these truths are visualized through mystical illumination, neither idleness, nor the mad pursuit of or endeavour to possess material objects, nor the preoccupations of boyhood or manhood, nor ‘all that is at enmity with joy’, can distort their influence. Hence, when man is advanced in years, the soul has the glimpse of the sea of immortality which helped us in coming on this earth. Our soul can in a moment recollect the experiences of childhood. When our mind is vacant and tranquil, and the imagination at its sublime, by recollecting the experiences of childhood, we can easily and instantly go back to the shore of eternity. In other words, in our innocent imagination we can have a vision of our eternal home.

In this excerpt Wordsworth picturises childhood with the help of apt images. The first is the image of fire(embers) which slowly dies out in the course of time, leaving ashes behind. The vision of childhood also slowly dies out when we grow up, yet the spark remains. In another image ‘hope’ has been likened to a young bird which flutters with its new-fledged wings. The third, ‘affection’ is used to describe innocent experiences.

The words used to describe the process to visualize the eternal abode spontaneously drive home the purpose of the poet – instruct through pleasure/delight in a very convincing manner in lines colloquial yet full of meaning. They dignify the simplicity, but at times rises to grandeur without falling into pomposity.

**Self-check Exercise II**

1) The first four lines of the extract have been scanned. Now scan the next six lines.

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2) What are the qualities of childhood?

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3) Can you trace/find Wordsworth’s concept of Nature in the extract you have read aloud just now?

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11.4 TINTERN ABBEY

11.4.1 The Background of the Poem

The sub-title of the poem ‘Tintern Abbey’ is ‘Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’. The poem was composed in 1798, five years after his first visit to the banks of the river Wye, for The Lyrical Ballads, published in 1798. His first visit in 1793, the year following his return from France, when he was in a state of intellectual and emotional turmoil, was still afresh in his mind. About the composition of this poem, Wordsworth writes: “No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern after crossing Wye…Not a line of it was altered….”

The main cause of his mental and moral crisis was his disillusionment with the French Revolution in 1789 and the war between England and France in 1793. He lost his faith in Man and even in God. He cherished to find some solace and this consolation came to him in the lap of Nature. Therefore, when he revisited Tintern in 1798, he was a chastened person fully aware of the sufferings of humanity. He now no longer cried and longed for ‘dizzy raptures’ and ‘glad animal movements’, but looked for a deeper meaning in Nature. On this tour of 1798 with Dorothy, he discovered that ‘Man had much to learn from Nature which was Man’s prime teacher’.

11.4.2 The Text

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winter ! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. – Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thought of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark Sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard tufts
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration: feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love.

Glossary

Tintern Abbey: A monastery, situated in the ruins on the bank of the river Wye, in Monmouthshire
Steep and lofty cliffs: Precipitous and high mountains
Repose: Take rest
Sycamore: A kind of fig tree common in the Middle – East countries.
Tufts: A bunch of hair, feathers, grass, etc. growing or held closely together at the base
hue: The degree or brightness in a colour
grove: A group of trees
copses: Small trees or bushes
wreaths: Column
vagrant dwellers: Gypsies
Hermit: A holy person; sage
oft: Often
din: A continuous loud and unpleasant sound
slight or trivial: Ordinary; petty
11.4.3 The Stanza Form

The first four lines are scanned for you.

/                   /                 /                   /               /
Five years / have past ; / five summer / with / the length
/                   /                 /                   /               /
Of five / long winter / and / again / I hear
/                   /                 /                   /               /
These waters / rolling / from / their mountain / springs
/                   /                 /                   /               /
With a / soft inland murmur. Once / again

This passage is an example of unrhymed iambic pentameter versification.

The first foot of the fourth line is Trochaic.

11.4.4 A Discussion

Wordsworth begins with a particular scene and a personal memory as experienced five years ago. In these five years he had passed through a period of great despondency. He was distressed by his love-affair with Annette Vallon who also bore him a daughter in 1792, and by political events – The Reign of Terror in France after the Revolution and the war between his motherland, England, and France, the country he wanted to settle in.

The poet gives a vivid account of his second visit to the Wye where he has come again after five years. He again hears the water rolling from their mountain springs with a soft inland murmur. Once again he feels elated in the presence of the wooded hills overhanging the Wye. The precipitous and high mountains, thick Sycamore trees, the cottage ground, the orchards with ripe fruits, the hedge row, etc. etc. are all observed and remembered by him and he recalls an experience. The remembrance of these sights and scenes has been a source of sweet, soothing and healing sensations from 1793 to 1798 when he had been living in London and when the crushed ideals of the Revolution and other sundry things had shaken his inner spirit. Yet the lastingness of his impression derived from the passionate fusion with the myriad forms of Nature sustained him in these critical years of his life. The revisit to the Tintern Abbey on the Wye with all its surroundings gave him mental relief, restored his peace of mind and thrilled the innermost recesses of his heart. The impressions gathered / received from the Nature left a moralizing influence on his character and inspired him to perform the ordinary deeds of love and kindness done in daily life, which are often forgotten and ignored.

Wordsworth always looked towards Nature for peace and comfort for his sorrow-stricken heart and in hours of weariness amid din and bustle of city life. In short, whenever he was in communion with Nature, he discovered spiritual and intellectual meaning in Her as if he were in the presence of some unseen power.

In the above extract the metre is blank verse – unrhymed ten – syllabled iambic lines. The lines of the excerpt use a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation. The excerpt is a lyrical meditation on the theme of Nature and its effect on a troubled mind.
Self-check Exercise III

1) Enumerate Wordsworth’s causes of distress between 1793 and 1798.

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2) Find out the two phrases that are used to celebrate Nature.

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3) The first four lines have been scanned for you. Now scan the next four lines.

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4) What soothes the poet’s mind?

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11.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you have read about the life of William Wordsworth and examined two excerpts from his poetry.

Wordsworth owes his distinctive position in English literature to his spiritual interpretation of Nature. He penetrated to the very heart of Nature and saw in it a revelation of universal spirit of God in the woods, mountains, meadows and men. He has been called a pantheist because he saw the one Universal Spirit.
permeating the whole universe. Therefore, he was also a mystic. He made it his mission to influence and convert humanity to this new religion – a religion to soothe and heal the tired humanity. His another important mission was to teach, and his greatest poems like ‘Tintern Abbey’, ‘Intimations of Immortality’ and Prelude enabled him to transmute his teaching into pure poetry which are indeed music to our ears and inspire in us obedience to divine eternal law.

11.6 SUGGESTED READING

Meyer Abrams, : The Mirror and the Lamp
A. C. Bradley : Oxford Lectures
Boris Ford : From Blake to Byron
Graham Hough : The Romantic Poets

11.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

1) 14 years old.
2) St. John’s College, Cambridge.
3) (a) S.T. Coleridge  (b) 1798
4) Dorothy; Mary Hutchison

Self-check Exercise II

1) The thought / of our / past years / in me / doth breed  

Perpetual benedic tions : not indeed  

For that / which is / most wor / thy to / be blest ;  

Delight / and li / berty /, the sim / ple creed  

of child / hood , whe / ther bu / sy or / at rest ,  

with new /- fledged hope / still flut / tering in / his breast :  

These six lines are Iambic Pentametre. Its rhyme scheme is c c d c d d .

2) a) The child is intuitively aware of the immortality of the human spirit.  
b) His spiritual perception of divinity is superior.  
c) He is at liberty to spend his days in delightful acts.  
d) His feelings and thoughts are innocent.  
e) A child can have glimpses of eternal abode.

3) Yes, Wordsworth firmly believed that Nature was the abode of God, that there was an indissoluble bond between Nature, Man and God, that God in
Man and in Nature is one. When we are child, we are the inhabitants of Nature, and therefore most near to Him. When we become man, we realize Him in the perfect sense; when we are calm and serene we can visualize Him in everything around us. Even after questions and doubts about immortality, i.e. existence of a world of spirit, disappear only if we go nearer to Nature. Read the previous sections for more information.

Self-check Exercise III

1) i) His love-affair with the French girl, Annette Vallon, and their daughter.
   ii) Failure of the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.
   iii) The war between England and France in 1793.

2) i) Nature in her modesty and
   ii) Nature in her sublimity.

3) Do I / behold / these steep / and lofty cliffs ,
   That on / a wild / secluded scene / impress
   Thoughts of / more deep / solitude and / connect
   The landscape with / the quiet of / the sky.

An example of unrhymed Iambic Pentameter.

4) Read the Text and the Discussion and find out the natural objects of beauty described therein.
UNIT 12  S.T. COLERIDGE: ‘KUBLA KHAN’

Structure

12.0  Objectives
12.1  Introduction
12.2  S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834)
   12.2.1  Poems of Coleridge
12.3  Kubla Khan
   12.3.1  The Background of the Poem
   12.3.2  The Text
   12.3.3  Scansion
   12.3.4  A Discussion
12.4  Let Us Sum Up
12.5  Suggested Reading
12.6  Answers to Self-Check Exercises

12.0  OBJECTIVES

After having read this Unit you will be able to:

•  Talk and write about Coleridge the poet; and
•  Appreciate ‘Kubla Khan’.

12.1  INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we have discussed Coleridge’s life in brief and his poetry in general. It has been pointed out by critics that his whole life was a fragment and so are almost all his poetic creations.

It is better if you read through the Unit section by section and do the exercises as you progress. Do give yourself a break after you have worked on a section.

12.2  SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772-1834)

Coleridge was born on October 21, 1772 in Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire. After studying at Christ’s Hospital, a charity school in London, he went to Cambridge, but left the University without completing his studies, and enlisted for some time as a private in a cavalry regiment. Heavy debt might have been the reason of this erratic step. Right from his childhood, he was a sensitive and lonely boy who enthusiastically read whatever books he found around him.

Disillusioned with the French Revolution and convinced that freedom was impossible in Great Britain, he together with Robert Southey and other friends conceived the Utopian idea of Pantisocracy in which twelve gentlemen of good education and liberal principles would marry twelve ladies, migrate to Susquehanna, somewhere in the United States of America, and form a classless community. They proposed to work on a farm two hours a day to eke out a living and devote the rest of their time in literary pursuit. Lack of fund and young ladies
forced them to abandon the venture. But in his enthusiasm for it, Coleridge married Sarah Fricker, Southey’s sister-in-law, a step he repented throughout his life.

The Coleridges settled at Clevendon in Somerset where he pursued his literary interests and the result was the publication of a political and literary magazine, *The Watchman*, which, as was his wont with other activities, was short lived. He also published a volume of poems, *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1796. But it was only in the contact and companionship with Wordsworth that he discovered himself, his mental peace, security and environmental harmony, to write his most enduring poems between 1797 and 1800 – ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, the first part of ‘Christabel’ and ‘Kubla Khan’. In collaboration with Wordsworth, *The Lyrical Ballads*, the manifesto of ‘New spirit in poetry’, was published in 1798.

In 1804, Coleridge decided to separate from his wife and went to Malta and Italy in search of health. However, he returned to England in 1806 and found a permanent home at Highgate in the house of Dr. Gillman. Here he gave up his addiction to opium. In 1817, he published his magnum opus *Biographia Literaria* – literary autobiography – which, though not an organized treatise, contains some of the most philosophical principles of poetic composition to be found anywhere. In it he has made a distinction between Fancy and Imagination. According to him, Fancy is passive which simply computes isolated mental pictures – memories and associations. It is intellectual rationalism. On the other hand, Imagination is creative, synthetic and magical power which brings about the fusion of human faculties.

When in 1824, under the patronage of George IV, The Royal Society of Literature was founded, Coleridge was nominated as one of the first ten associates with an annual pension of £100.

He published his last work *On the Constitution of Church and State* in 1830. He breathed his last at Highgate, London, on July 25, 1834.

Coleridge was a poet, philosopher and critic all rolled into one. He possessed the most vigorous mind among the Romantic poets. His versatility, however was also his undoing.

Do you find Coleridge’s life interesting? If you do, you will find a longer introduction to it in any History of English Literature.

Now find out how well you have understood the section you read just now.

**Self-check Exercise I**

1) What was the aim of Pantisocracy?

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2) Who was Sarah Fricker? 

3) In the space provided below mention Coleridge’s most celebrated poems.

4) The Royal Society of Literature was founded in the year .................

12.2.1 Poems of Coleridge

Among the poets of the 19th century Coleridge is the most fragmentary and unsystematic. Of the three poems on which his fame traditionally rests, only ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is complete. ‘Christabel’ and ‘Kubla Khan’ are merely fragmentary. Apart from these three great poems, he also wrote ‘The Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ – a poem of hope and joy as experienced by the poet, ‘Frost at Midnight’, which subscribes to the theory of pantheistic philosophy – presence of divine spirit in nature, ‘Dejection: An Ode’, and ‘Youth and Age’ express poet’s sense of failure of creative powers. He also composed some political poems like ‘France: An Ode’, which underlines the disgust caused by the failure of the French Revolution and subsequent reign of terror; ‘The Destruction of Bastille’ extols the event, whereas ‘The Ode on the Departing Year’ fears the fall of England.

Coleridge was the true pantheist who took delight in everything around him, even the weird and bizarre. In his later days, however, under the influence of German transcendental philosophy, he added a new note to it that the external world is phenomenal rather than actual and in whatever form the external objects appear, is actually given to them by ourselves, i.e., Nature lives in us and the impressions we receive from it are nothing distinct from us but a reflection of our own thoughts. He, however, honestly adhered to his own view of poetry: “the best words in the best order.”

In his three important poems on which his fame rests, there is an element of romance enveloped in mystery and marvel of the unknown and untravelled regions. Nature is depicted in its myriad forms – familiar and comforting, tender and soothing, cheerful and jubilant, weird and horrifying, desolate and mournful, tumultuous and perturbing. All these are linked to produce the harmony of a perfect and moral impression. To the critics most of his poems may appear to be
fragmentary, but to the reader they present a wholesome experience. While, on
the one hand, other romantic poets – Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and
others – weave a web of romance from their personal experience, Coleridge sees
it among the wonders of the external world, links them to the subtleties of human
psychology and presents them in a story rich in dramatic situations and
psychological truths with a delicate sense of morality.

The essence of Coleridge’s romanticism lies in his artistic rendering of the
supernatural. In ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ there are a phantom ship with
its ghastly crew of Death and Life-in-Death, the Polar spirit seeking vengeance
for the murder of the Albatross, the two supernatural voices representing Justice
and Mercy and a troop of celestial spirits animating the dead crew. The whole
atmosphere of this long poem is charged with a sense of heightened mystery. In
‘Christabel’, the evil spirit that haunts the body of Geraldine and blast the
innocent happiness of sweet and lovely Christabel is in the true tradition of
vampires and Coleridge infuses a mysterious dread into her. In ‘Kubla Khan’, a
poet, a creator, is shown caught in a spell of creative inspiration which transcends
his mundane existence into a purely supernatural being.

Coleridge’s chief purpose, and also a problem, while writing about supernatural
characters and events as he himself said, was “to transform from our inward
nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these
shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment,
which constitutes the poetic faith”, i.e. one has to willingly suspend the disbelief
to enjoy poetry, written in frenzy and at the height of imagination.

Coleridge’s treatment of the supernatural elements made it imperative for him to
lay the scenes in the Middle ages, marked for its magic, witchcraft and
superstition. And yet his treatment of the supernatural was quite modern, full of
philosophical and psychological hints.

The most distinguishing feature of Romantic poetry is its emphasis on
imagination, and Coleridge’s poetry reveals his intense imaginative power. He
decreed poetry to be governed by the principles of Imagination and not by those
of Fancy. To him Imagination was an organizing and integrating principle in
absence of which no great poetry could be written.

12.3 KUBLA KHAN

12.3.1 The Background of the Poem

‘Kubla Khan’ was published by Coleridge in 1816 at the request of Lord Byron.
It was described by Coleridge as ‘A Vision in a Dream, a Fragment’, and in a
brief preface to the poem, the poet writes that after taking anodyne he “fell asleep
in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence … in
Purchas’s Pilgrimage: ‘Here the Kubla Khan commanded a palace to be built,
and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground was enclosed
with a wall’ …. On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct
recollection of the whole … and instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that
are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person
on business … and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room,
found to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained
some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with
the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had
passed away ….”

12.3.2 The Text

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
    Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:
And ‘mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the Fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!
    A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
    It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight ‘twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle around him **thrice**,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Glossary

Xanadu : The summer capital of Kubla Khan
Kubla Khan : The grandson of the great Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongolian Empire. Kubla Khan ruled from 1257 to 1294. He founded the city Peking(Beijing).

stately : splendid; grand
decree : order
caverns : deep caves
sunless sea : subterranean sea
girdled around : enclosed
sinuous : winding
rills : small streams
chasm : a broad, deep opening in the earth
slanted : sloped
athwart : across
cedar : cedar trees
haunted : visited again and again
wailing : sobbing; crying; moaning
seething : bubbling with a hissing sound
pants : short breaths
momently : every moment
chaffy grain : grain not yet freed from chaff
thresher’s flail : a mechanical device to separate grain from chaff
dancing rocks : large pieces of rocks being thrown about
measure : music
dulcimer : a stringed musical instrument
thrice : a favourite number in magical rites
12.3.3 Scansion

Let us scan lines 47 to 50 of the poem.

/           /                   /
That sun / ny dome! / those caves / of ice
/           /                   /
And all / who heard / should see / them there,
/           /                   /
And all / should cry, / Beware! Beware!
/           /                   /
His fla/shing eyes, / his floa/ting hair!

Though the poem is composed in irregular metre, these four lines are quite regular written in iambic tetrameter.

Now scan the following four lines:
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

For answers see Answers to Exercises II.

12.3.4 A Discussion

‘Kubla Khan’ is a poem about the act of poetic creation. It is significant for a thrilling picture of a poet in ecstasy in the process of creation. Kubla Khan (1216-1294), one of the powerful Asiatic kings, was the founder of the Mongol dynasty in China. The poem is both descriptive and suggestive – descriptive in the sense that it describes in detail Kubla Khan’s pleasure-dome of “rare device”, the source of the sacred river Alph, the maid, and suggestive in that if the poet could revive his inspiration a great poetry would follow. Coleridge also hints at some physical clues to identify a poet in his moments of inspiration.

Kubla Khan ordered a magnificent pleasure-palace to be built for him in Xanadu, also called Chandu or Shandu. So a ten-miles of fertile land on the banks of the sacred river Alph was enclosed with walls and towers. The source of the sacred river was a deep mysterious gorge that ran down a green hill across a wood of cedar trees. All these make the enclosed area wild, savage and enchanted, yet it is holy, fit to be frequented by a woman wandering about in the light of a waning moon in search of her demon-lover. Amidst the loud, tumultuous noise caused by the fall of water into the sunless sea, Kubla Khan could hear the voices of his ancestors to be prepared for a war in the near future.

In the last stanza, the poet gives us a vivid picture of an inspired poet and the act of poetic creation. Once, in a vision, he saw and heard an Abyssinian maid playing on her dulcimer and singing sonorously of the wild splendour of Mount Abora. The poet says that if he could recreate in his imagination the sweet, enchanting music of the maid, he would feel so inspired and ecstatic that with the music of his poetry he could build Kubla Khan’s pleasure-dome in the air / imagination, i.e., the listeners would see it in their imagination. In other words, a poet in a spell of poetic inspiration is capable of creation like God (Read the section on the Background).
In the last five lines Coleridge draws a picture of a poet inspired. When a poet’s eyes are flashing, his hair floating and seem to be withdrawn from the material world, the listeners / readers ought to be beware of him and feel awed, but not fearful, for he has fed on honey-dew and drunk the milk of Paradise. In that moment he transcends into a superhuman being.

The poem is full of suggestive phrases and lines capable of evoking mystery. The description of the deep romantic chasm, the woman wailing for her demon-lover, the ancestral voices prophesying war, the source of the river Alph, sinuous rills, etc. are natural phenomena, but are suggested in such a way as if they were supernatural occurrences. The poet takes us to distant times and remote and unknown regions where the very unfamiliarity of the scenes prompt us to suspend our reasoning faculties, “willing suspension of disbelief” as Coleridge called it.

The very idea of poetic creativity taking shape under divine inspiration and of the poet transcending his mundane existence and transforming himself to the level of superhuman being when caught in his poetic frenzy evokes a world of magic and enchantment, a romantic concept of poetry.

Kubla Khan’s strength and splendour are symbols of the might of poetry and his architectural achievements suggest power of the poetic imagination. The image of ‘dome’ suggests fulfillment and satisfaction of the might of finished creation.

The rhythm and the sound are perfect and conform to Coleridge’s dictum : ‘the best words in the best order’.

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**Self-check Exercise II**

1) What is the subtitle of the poem?

2) Identify the similes used for the **mighty fountain**.
3) Read the text of the poem carefully and find out the number of proper nouns. What do they suggest?

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4) Write down the images used for **dome**.

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5) What is the epithet used for the word **river**.

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6) Identify one paradoxical line in the poem.

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7) Scan the last four lines given in the section 12.3.3.

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12.4 LET US SUM UP

Coleridge was the philosopher of the Romantic movement. His poems reveal his love of the marvelous and his great power to fuse natural with the supernatural. ‘Kubla Khan’ illustrates vividly what he meant when he called the imagination a ‘synthetic and magical power’, a power which ‘instantly’ fuses ‘shattered fragments of memory’ to produce a great poem.

The poem composed in irregular metre, is the recollection of a dream Coleridge saw when he had fallen asleep while reading Purchas’s Pilgrimage. Coleridge was an avid reader of travel literature.

The poem is about the act of poetic creation, and notable for a thrilling picture of a poet in ecstasy.

12.5 SUGGESTED READING

M.H. Abrams : The Mirror and the Lamp

C.M. Bowra : The Romantic Imagination

Graham Hough : The Romantic Poets

A.R. Jones and William Tydeman(ed) : Coleridge (Casebook Series)

William Walsh : Coleridge: The Poet

12.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

1) i) To establish a classless society
   ii) To work for two hours to earn a living, and devote the rest of the time in literary pursuit.

2) Coleridge’s wife and Southey’s sister-in-law.

3) i) The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
   ii) ‘Christabel’
   iii) ‘Kubla Khan’

4) 1824

Self-check Exercise II

1) ‘A Vision in a Dream, a Fragment’.

2) Huge fragments volted like rebounding hail
   Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail (ll 20-21)

3) Xanadu, Kubla Khan, Alph, maid, Mount Ebora, Paradise
   They suggest remoteness, fear and awe.
4) i) stately pleasure-dome (l 2)  
      ii) a dome of pleasure (l 31)  
      iii) a sunny pleasure-dome (l 36)  

5) sacred  

6) A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice ! (l 35)  

7) Answer to the scansion (12.3.3)  

\[ \text{Weave / a cir / cle round / him thrice,} \]  
\[ \text{And close / your eyes / with ho / ly dread,} \]  
\[ \text{For he / on hon / ey-dew / hath fed,} \]  
\[ \text{And drunk / the milk / of Pa / radise.} \]  

Though this poem is composed in irregular metre, these four lines are quite regular written in iambic tetrameter.  

Variation : the only variation is that in the first line the first foot is Trochaic.
UNIT 13 LORD BYRON

Structure

13.0 Objectives
13.1 Introduction
13.2 Lord Byron (1788-1824)
13.3 ‘Roll on Thou Deep and Dark Blue Ocean’
   13.3.1 The Background of the Poem
   13.3.2 The Text
   13.3.3 The Stanza Form
   13.3.4 An Appreciation
13.4 ‘George The Third’
   13.4.1 The Background of the Poem
   13.4.2 The Text
   13.4.3 A Discussion
13.5 Let Us Sum Up
13.6 Suggested Reading
13.7 Answers to Self-Check Exercises

13.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

• Talk about Byron the poet;
• Appreciate ‘Roll on Thou Dark and Deep Blue Ocean’, and
• Examine ‘George the Third’ as a piece of satire.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we have discussed Byron’s life in brief because it has often been said that Byron’s life itself was poetic. Critics have read his poetry as a record of his life. We will see how this is true.

The first poem is an extract from Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage which is very close to a travelogue in verse. In the fourth canto from which the poem has been taken, Byron drops the mask of Childe Harold and talks about his experiences more directly. We have scanned a stanza of the poem. You may practice scansion by scanning the poem selected for you.

The second poem is a piece of satire born out of a feud with another poet—Robert Southey. We have, in the introduction to the poem shown how Byron ridicules Southey. Thus in both cases Byron is a participant in his poetry, a matter that critics have repeatedly pointed out.

It is better if you read through the unit section by section and do the exercises as you read. Give yourself a break after you have worked on a major section.
13.2 LORD BYRON (1788-1824)

Byron was the eldest of the second generation of the Romantic Poets. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey belonged to the first generation. You have already learnt about the first two. In the present and the succeeding two units you will read about the second generation, i.e. Byron, Shelley and Keats.

Byron was born in London on 22 January 1788 while his mother was on her way to Aberdeen. He was born in poverty and of a club foot. While the former disappeared by the time he was 10 years of age the latter remained permanently with him.

Byron was the son of one captain Jack Byron often remembered as ‘Mad Jack’. He had run through the fortunes of two heiresses—a marchioness who gave birth to Augusta Byron, the poet’s half sister, and Catherine Gordon of Gight, mother of the poet. It was while running away from her rapacious (typical of a person who takes everything he can, especially by force) husband that she gave birth to George.

When Byron was three years old his father died (1791). In 1794, when Byron was six, his cousin, the heir to the Byron title, was killed. So when the fifth Baron Byron died in 1798, Byron inherited the title at the age of ten and the mother and son moved to Newstead Abbey, a dilapidated Gothic inheritance.

In Scotland, Byron attended the grammar School at Aberdeen. He later went to Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge. Byron had always been a rebel. In order to avoid the regulation that forbade keeping dogs he kept a bear as a pet in his room at Cambridge. He also became a member of the Whig Club along with John Hobhouse, about whom you will read more later in this unit, and Lord Broughton.

Later Byron went to the Parliament. He spoke in support of the ‘frame-breakers’, or workers who had destroyed some textile machines through fear of unemployment. On another occasion he supported relief of Catholics in Scotland. He had sympathy for both Napoleon and George Washington. Byron almost wished that Napoleon were not defeated at Waterloo by the British.

Byron lived a considerable part of his life on the continent. It was at Leghorn in Italy that Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) joined him and they produced The Liberal magazine in which was published The Vision of Judgement an extract from which you are going to read later in this unit.

Byron, perhaps of all British poets, was the most European in outlook. Comparing him with Wordsworth, Bernard Blackstone, a critic, wrote:

> Wordsworth’s topos is a narrow one, the Lake District, and this limits his appeal to the European reader. Byron’s is a very broad one, the whole of Europe and the Mediterranean world, and this makes him strange to the English reader. Mosques, temples, bazaars, dervishes, pashas, deserts, wadis, don’t go down very easily to a palate accustomed to clergymen, farmers, public-houses, markets, churches and cottages. So that Byron has never seemed quite real to an English audience though his work was very real to himself and to his Mediterranean readers (Byron: A Survey, London, Longman, 1975, p.xi).
Mosques, temples and bazaars, dervishes, pashas, deserts and wadis are unusual in English poetry. So was Byron’s personal life unusual. Byron married Annabella Milbanke on 2 January 1815 but he had many women with whom he had affairs—Lady Caroline Lamb, Lady Oxford, Mary Godwin’s step sister Claire Clarimont, Teresa Guiccioli and an incestuous relationship with his half sister Augusta. The result was that he and Annabella got separated only after a year of marriage.

It has often been said that Byron’s life imitated literature and his poetry makes its primary impact as a historical and biographical document. Perhaps it is generally true to say about the Romantics that it helps us to appreciate a poet’s work if we know his or her life. This is more true in case of Byron. Perhaps his last ‘poetic’ act was his death (19 April, 1824) on the island of Missolonghi while he was working for Greek independence from the Turks.

Do you find Byron’s life interesting? If you do you will find a longer introduction to it in the Encyclopedia Britannica, at your Study Centre.

Now find out how well you have understood the short section you read just now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-check Exercise I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) In the space provided below write the names of the Romantic Poets of, the first generation.................................................................................................................. the second generation..................................................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) How old was Byron when he died?..................................................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) How did George Byron become a Lord and what did he inherit?..................................................................................................................</td>
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13.3 ROLL ON THOU DEEP AND DARK BLUE OCEAN

13.3.1 The Background of the Poem

‘Roll on Thou Deep and Dark Blue Ocean’ is an extract from Canto IV of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. We have here the stanzas CLXXVIII (178) to CLXXXIII (183). These are the last but 3 stanzas of the canto.

The poem Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage describes the journey of Childe Harold, whose experiences correspond to Byron’s own. On 2 July 1809 Byron left England along with a Cambridge friend John Cam Hobhouse, his servant Fletcher and his ‘little page’, Robert Rushton. On 6 July they reached Lisbon.
The Romantic Poets

The first two cantos describe the pilgrim, surfeited with his past life of sin and pleasure, finding diversions in his journey across Portugal, Spain, the Ionian Islands and Albania. Byron returned to Newstead in England in 1811 and the first two cantos were published in 1812. It was received enthusiastically by London society and launched Byron as a major poet of England. ‘I woke one morning’ Byron wrote in March 1812, ‘and found myself famous.’

In April 1816 Byron left England, never again to return to it. He went to Geneva in Switzerland where he met Shelley and completed the third canto of *Childe Harold*, which was published the same year. It describes the pilgrim’s travels to Belgium, the Rhine, the Alps and Jura. Childe Harold also reflects on the Spanish War, and the Battle of Waterloo (1815) at which, Napoleon suffered his final defeat against the United Kingdom.

In October 1816, Byron left Geneva for Venice with Hobhouse. In the fourth canto he speaks directly about his experiences in Italy, his meditations on time and history, on Venice and Petrarch, Ferrara and Tasso, Florence and Boccaccio, Rome and her great men ending with the symbol of the sea. Byron had an abiding interest in the mountains and the sea. The extract that you are going to read is a meditation on the symbol of the sea.

13.3.2 The Text

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is a society, where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:

I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne’er express, yet cannot all conceal.

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean — Roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
Man marks the earth with ruin — his control
Stops with the shore; upon the watery plain
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
A shadow of man’s rage, save his own,
When for a moment, like a drop of rain,
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
Without a grave, unknell’d, uncoffin’d, and unknown.

His steps are not upon thy paths, — thy fields
Are not a spoil for him, — thou dost arise
And shake him from thee; the vile strength he wields
For earth’s destruction thou dost all despise,
Spurning him from thy bosom to the skies,
And sends’t him, shivering in thy playful spray
And howling, to his Gods, where haply lies
His petty hope in some near port or bay,
And dashest him again to earth:— there let him lay
The armaments which thunderstrike the walls
Of rock-built cities, bidding nations quake,
And monarchs tremble in their capitals,
The oak leviathans, whose huge ribs make
Their clay creator the vain title take
Of lord of thee, and arbiter of war —
These are thy toys, and, as the snowy flake,
They melt into thy yeast of waves, which mar
Alike the Armada’s pride or spoils of Trafalgar.

Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee —
Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?
Thy waters wash’d them power while they were free,
And many a tyrant since; their shores obey
The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay
Has dried up realms to deserts: — not so thou; —
Unchangeable, save to thy wild waves’ play,
Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow:
Such as creation’s dawn beheld, thou rollest now.

Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty’s form
Glasses itself in tempests; in all time, —
Calm or convulsed, in breeze, or gale, or storm,
Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime
Dark—heaving boundless, endless, and sublime,
The image of eternity, the throne
Of the Invisible; even from out thy slime
The monsters of the deep are made; each zone
Obeys thee; thou goest forth, dread, fathomless, alone.

Glossary
rapture : great joy and delight.
ravage : to ruin and destroy; (of an army or a rabble) that robs
(an area) with violence.
spurn : to treat or refuse with angry pride.
haply : (old use) perhaps.
leviathan : a Biblical sea-monster; huge ship
arbiter : a person who has complete control or great influence
over actions, decisions.
armada : the fleet sent by Philip II of Spain against England in
1588 and defeated in the English Channel.
Trafalgar : Cape on the South Coast of Spain near which the
British fleet under Nelson gained victory over the fleets
of France and Spain on 21st October 1805.
azure : sky blue
torrid : very hot
convulsion : an unnaturally violent and sudden movement,
convulse : to shake (a person or animal and by extension a society) violently.

13.3.3 The Stanza Form

Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage is in an old stanza form. It was invented by Edmund Spenser (1552-99) and used in The Faerie Queene (1590, 1596), his greatest work. It thus came to be called the Spenserian stanza. In his preface to the first and second cantos of the poem Byron wrote thus:

The stanza of Spenser, according to one of our most successful poets, admits of every variety. Dr. Beattie makes the following observation: – ‘Not long ago, I began a poem in the style and stanza of Spenser, in which I propose to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for if I mistake not, the measure which I have adopted admits equally of all these kinds of composition. Strengthened in my opinion by such authority, and by the example of some in the highest order of Italian poets I shall make no apology for attempts at similar variations in the following composition; satisfied that if they are unsuccessful, their failure must be in the execution, rather than in the design, sanctioned by the practice of Ariosto, Thomson, and Beattie.

Byron saw himself in the tradition of Ludovico Ariosto author of the famous romantic poem Orlando Furioso (1532), James Thomson (1700-48), author of The Seasons (1726-30) and James Beattie (1735-1803) who wrote The Minstrel in Spenserian stanza and was an influence on The Prelude of Wordsworth.

/             /                /            /               /
Roll on/thou deep/ and dark/blue O’cean, roll,
/            /               /            /                /
Ten thou/sand fleets/ sweep o/ ver thee/ in vain
/                 /            /                   /
Man marks/ the earth/ with ru/ in; his/ control
/                          /               /            /
Stops with/ the shore; / upon/ the wat/ ery main
/                             /            /           /
The wrecks / are all / thy deed; / nor doth/ remain
/                                 /            /         /
A shad / ow of / man’s ra/ vage save / his own,
/                                      /      /
When for / a moment like / a drop / of rain
/                                             /      
He sinks / into /thy depths / with bub / bling groan
/                                                   /        
Without / a grave, / unknelled / uncof/ined, and / unknown.

Above we have eight five-foot iambic lines, followed by an iambic line of six feet. The lines rhyme ababbcbcc. You know that a five-foot iambic line is also
called iambic pentameter of which **blank verse** is made and a six-foot iambic line is known as iambic hexameter and also **Alexandrine**.

Byron has used this stanza form because he agreed with James Beattie that it would be able to express his variety of moods effectively. Notice that a poet makes a conscious decision about a variety of matters before writing poetry. This may appear contrary to the popular notion that poetry gets written without conscious effort. Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ was composed in a dream; Shelley wrote about the Eolian Harp. However, poetry is in words what a flower is in its petals and sepals, androecium and gynaecium, more than a sum of its parts. A great poem is likely to elicit a unique response from every individual who reads it. You may, now that you have read the poem carefully yourself, read my appreciation of it.

### 13.3.4 An Appreciation

‘Roll on, Thou Deep and Dark Blue Ocean’ is a ceremonial song in praise of the sea. It is an anthem to the Ocean. It is the classic voice of a poet not in the Apollonian but in the Dionysian tradition. Here there is not the clarity and balance, neatness of outlines and the beauty of form but the rapture, the enthusiasm, the exuberance and joy of youth. Here is Romantic poetry in its splendour.

The English Romantics were lovers of nature. ‘I love not Man the Less’ proclaims Byron, ‘but nature more’. Byron’s nature, as that of the classical poets – Dryden and Pope, Johnson and Goldsmith — was not truth — the laws of nature-but God’s variegated creation, its soothing power, its destructive aspect and creative force — Shelley’s destroyer and preserver. What Shelley saw in the ‘wild’ West Wind, Byron sees in the sea. The ‘West Wind’s clarion O’er the dreaming earth’ drives ‘sweet buds like flocks to feed in air’. Byron’s ocean chastises the vain man, melts his Armadas and the spoils of Trafalgars into the yeast of its waves. From its slime are born the monsters of the sea.

‘Roll on’ is a hymn to the sea, because it is the Almighty’s ‘glorious mirror’. It is His throne. It is the image of eternity itself. It expresses God’s grandeur in its varied aspects — calm and violent as in a ‘breeze, or gale, or storm’; frigid as in the polar regions and dark and tempestuous as in the equatorial. In looking at the sea as a symbol of the Divine, because of its variegated beauty, Byron pre-empts Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844’-89). Hopkins in ‘Pied Beauty’ saw God represented in beauty that is in many colours, as in certain birds, or the sky—azure and white—or the fish (trout) with its ‘rose-moles’ (red dots)—or the landscape with its bends, portions fallow and ploughed, or the freckled skin. What we find in the last stanza of ‘Roll on’ is magnified many times by Hopkins in ‘Pied Beauty’ but the seed of experience in both cases is the same.

In ‘Roll on’, the sea has been apostrophized. The poem is an address to the sea. It is the expression of the rapture of communion with the ‘Universe’ which Byron thinks he ‘can ne’er express, yet cannot all conceal’. However, Byron’s rapture is well communicated to the reader through the images in and the cadences of the poem. The tone is set in the first stanza itself.
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There is society……

By the deep sea, and music in its roar!

Byron does something more. He ignores the barriers raised by human language, by refusing to distinguish between the sea and ocean as he declines to accept that society is made only of human beings. For Byron there is music in the beat of the drum, the roar of the sea.

Byron was a poet of the mountain peaks and the sea just as Wordsworth of the child and ‘the meanest flower’ and Keats of the ‘unravished bride’ and the ‘fruit with ripeness to the core’. It is strange, but true that the creator of Don Juan loved loneliness— ‘the pathless wood’, ‘the lonely shore’. The dichotomy of the poet finds expression in the oxymorons.

Byron’s repudiation of man’s pride and power finds expression in the image of man compared to rain drop falling on the surface of the sea. Like the rain drop, he dies with no more than a ‘bubbling groan’. Worse still is his image in the third stanza where he is rejected and thrown into the sky, ridiculed by the cold and ‘playful spray’ and sent back to some port or bay nearby. In the fourth stanza it is not the ordinary man but his monarch who is subjected to the same insult. The ‘clay creator’ refers to the man who makes the ships of war—‘oak leviathans’. Man claims to rule over the waves and assumes titles such as ‘arbiter of war’. However, the truth is that it is the sea which has complete control over the monarch, the empire builder. For the sea, his ships are objects to play with.

Byron began with an image of the insignificance of man in the second stanza and through the fifth he develops it into the futility of his exploits—the decay of ancient civilizations of Assyria, Greece, Rome and Carthage. To Byron, the poet, it matters not which came first—Assyrian or Greek, Roman or Carthagian. Poets are insular to the prosaic world of facts. What matters to them is the core of humanity, made in the image of God. Byron feels that man’s acquisitive instinct has led him to ruin. Wordsworth said, ‘Getting and spending we lay waste our powers’. Byron’s sea scorns the emperor, spurns the conqueror and lays waste civilizations that are expressions of man’s greed. While they decay, the sea remains as young as it was in the first dawn of creation. It is the image of eternity.

If on the one hand Byron decries the British victory on the Spanish Armada in the sixteenth century and the Battle of Trafalgar in his own time, with contempt, on the other he remembers Shakespeare, if only in a veiled way, with approval. There is an echo of Sonnet 60. In the last two lines of the fifth stanza, Shakespeare wrote:

Time doth transfixe the flourish set on youth,
And delves the parallels in beauties brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature’s truth,
And nothing stands but for his scieth to mow.

From the second through the fourth stanzas are the various images of man as an ordinary individual compared to a rain drop, as a king and tyrant who is repulsed to the shore; as a conqueror whose ships are the ocean’s toys, and as a builder of civilizations that decay. Byron has presented a series of word pictures that drive
his point home. The last two lines of the fifth stanza, in reminding us of ‘creation’s dawn’ prepare us for the ‘image of eternity’ that the sea becomes in the last stanza. The transition, due to those two lines, becomes smooth and gentle.

There is a happy marriage of sound with sense in the poem. The choice of the word ‘roll’ is a stroke of genius of a master craftsman. The epanadiplotic (from epanadiplotis) use of roll in the first line of the second paragraph echo in our ears the sound of the wave and the sound suggests its ebb and flow to our visual imagination. The pattern of rhyme suggested by the words —roll, vain, control, plain, remain…. as it were, bring the elation to our heart that the sight of the gigantic waves in the sea themselves bring. Byron thought that the Spenserian stanza was capable of expressing a variety of moods. In this short specimen itself we notice that while the second, through fifth stanzas, at the level of the sound, picture the sea the first supports an introspective mood and the last a meditative one. The introspective mood is suggested by the three assertive statements of the first stanza.

The repetition of ‘There is’ three times suggests that the introspection is only a prelude to the rhetorical vein in which Byron is soon going to get into. However, the rhetoric here only brings in variety to the poetry. It does not detract us from the rich poetic experience that Byron has to offer. The poem has remained unforgettable because it has pictured in words the sights and sounds of the actual experience of standing in front of the expanse of the sea. It is a product of Byron’s catholic temper, his love for the sea and above all an abiding faith in man’s capacity to improve himself in the face of adversity.

**Self-check Exercise II**
A) Comment on the following examples of literary devices from ‘Roll on’ in the space provided for the purpose:
   a) There is society where none intrudes.
      By the deep sea…..
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   b) I love not man the less…
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      ..............................................................................................................
c) What I can ne’er express, yet cannot all conceal.

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d) .....his control

Stops with the shore....

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e) Without a grave, unknell’d, uncoffin’d and unknown

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f) The Oak leviathans whose huge ribs make

Their clay-creator the vain title take

Of lord of thee....

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g) Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, What are they?

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h) Thy waters washed them power while they were free.

i) The stranger, slave, or savage…

j) Time writes no wrinkles on thine azure brow
   Such as creation’s dawn beheld, thou rollest now.

k) Thou glorious mirror.

B) Look up in the dictionary for the meanings of ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ and record them below.
13.4 GEORGE THE THIRD

13.4.1 Background of the Poem

Byron’s *The Vision of Judgment* (1822) is a parody of Robert Southey’s (1774-1843) original poem, *A Vision of Judgment* (1821). (Notice the difference in the two titles.) Southey’s was meant to be a panegyric to George III of England who died in 1820. Byron’s is a satire both on Southey and the King.

In Southey’s poem, the poet in a trance sees George III rise from his tomb and reach the gates of Heaven where the Devil and Wilkes the democrat leader come to charge him with crimes he committed on earth. However, they retire in discomfiture when Washington eulogises him and he is greeted by the previous English monarchs, the eminent English and finally his own family.

In the preface to his poem Southey made a direct attack on Byron’s works and referred to him as the leader of the ‘satanic school’ of poetry. In response Byron wrote the parody in which Southey is swept up by one of the devils from the Lake District where he offers to write Satan’s biography and on being declined the favour, Michael’s. when he attempts to read his own ‘Vision’ Saint Peter,

> Upraised his keys,  
> And at the fifth line knock’d the poet down;

Southey fell into the lake but there he did not drown,

> ‘He first sank to the bottom —like his works,  
> But soon rose to the surface —like himself;  
> For all corrupted things are buoy’d, like corks,  
> By their own rottenness, light as an elf,  
> Or wisp that flits O’er a morass;

This is trenchant satire and Southey had provoked Byron to deserve it.

The extracts that you are going to read are mainly satire on George III. In it, however, Byron praises George’s domestic virtues. His family life was free from the characteristic vice of his predecessors. However he wanted to re-establish his personal rule prevalent during the reigns of the later stuarts. He opposed Catholic emancipation, the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. He suffered from recurring fits of insanity and finally became insane in 1811. His eldest son was appointed regent until his father’s death in 1820.

If you now read the satire you will be able to appreciate the darts that Byron shoots at George.

13.4.2 The Text

> In the first year of freedom’s second dawn  
> Died George the Third; although no tyrant, one  
> Who shielded tyrants, till each sense withdrawn  
> Left him nor mental nor external sun:  
> A better farmer ne’er brush’d dew from lawn,  
> A worse king never left a realm undone!
He died – but left his subjects still behind,
One half as mad - and t’other no less blind.

He died ! His death made no great stir on earth:
   His burial made some pomp; there was profusion
Of velvet, gilding, brass, and no great dearth
   Of aught but tears — save those shed by collusion.
For these things may be bought at their true worth:
   Of elegy there was the due infusion-
Bought also; and the torches, cloaks, and banners,
Heralds, and relics of old Gothic manners,

Form’d a sepulchral melodrame. Of all
   The fools who flock’d to swell or see the show,
Who cared about the corpse? The funeral
   Made the attraction, and the black the woe.
There throbb’d not there a thought which pierced the pall;
   And when the gorgeous coffin was laid low,
It seem’d the mockery of hell to fold
The rottenness of eighty years in gold.

….‘Look to the earth, I said, and say again:
   When this old, blind, mad, helpless, weak, poor worm
Began in youth’s first bloom and flush to reign,
   The world and he both wore a different form,
And much of earth and all the watery plain
   Of ocean call’d him king: through many a storm
His isles had floated on the abyss of time;
   For the rough virtues chose them for their clime.

‘He came to his sceptre young; he leaves it old;
   Look to the state in which he found his realm,
And left it; and his annals too behold,
   How to a minion first he gave the helm;
How grew upon his heart a thirst for gold,
   The beggar’s vice, which can but overwhelm
The meanest hearts; and for the rest, but glance
Thine eye along America and France.

‘Tis true, he was a tool from first to last
   (I have the workmen safe); but as a tool
So let him be consumed. From out the past
   Of ages, since mankind have known the rule
Of monarchs —from the bloody rolls amass’d
   Of sin and slaughter —from the Cesar’s school,
Take the worst pupil; and produce a reign.
More drench’d with gore, more cumber’d with the slain

‘He ever warr’d with freedom and the free:
   Nations as men, home subjects, foreign foes,
So that they utter’d the word ‘Liberty!’
Found George the Third their first opponent. Whose
History was ever stain’d as his will be
With national and individual woes?
I grant his household abstinence: I grant
His neutral virtues, which most monarchs want;

‘I know he was a constant consort; own
He was a decent sire, and middling lord.
All this is much, and most upon a throne;
As temperance, if at Apicius’ board,
Is more than at an anchorite’s supper shown.

‘I grant him all the kindest can accord;
And this was well for him, but not for those
Millions who found him what oppression chose.
‘The New World shook him off; the Old yet groans
Beneath what he and, his prepared, if not
Completed: he leaves heirs on many thrones
To all his vices, without what begot
Compassion for him—his tame virtues; drones
Who sleep, or despots who have now forgot
A lesson which shall be re-taught them, wake
Upon the thrones of earth: but let them quake!’

(From The Vision of Judgment)

Glossary

**freedom’s second dawn** : 1820 was a year of political unrest in southern Europe including the beginning of the Greek revolt against Turkey

**aught** : I don’t know; don’t care

**herald** : a person who carried messages from a ruler and gave important pieces of news to the people

**gothic** : of or concerning a Germanic people called Goths, who fought against the Roman empire; their style in art and architecture; old fashioned

**sepulchre** : tomb

**sepulchral** : a reminder of the dead

**melodrame** : melodrama

**abyss** : a bottomless hole

**scepter** : a short rod or bar carried by a monarch

**annals** : historical records

**minion** : a person who flatters his superiors for favours.

**helm** : the position from which things are controlled.

**cumber** : encumber – to fill up (a place) inconveniently

**sire** : the father of an animal, especially of a horse.
middling : fair, quite
Ram is middling good in soccer.

Apicius : a person who knew a lot about food and drink in the time of Tiberius. He hanged himself when he found he had spent a large part of his fortune on his luxuries.

anchorite : hermit
quake : tremble, shake.

13.4.3 A Discussion

‘George the Third’, as you know, is an extract from Byron’s The Vision of Judgment. The scene which the poem has in the foreground is that of the decease, funeral and ascent of George III to Heaven.

The first stanza sets the background of the poem. It announces the event — the demise of George III — and sets the comico-satirical tone of the poem. 1820 was the year in which the struggle for Greek independence began in which Byron also took some interest. George died in the same year. Byron thus makes use of periphrasis. He tells us about some of George’s good qualities— that he was no tyrant and was a good farmer—and some bad ones — that he shielded tyrants, (perhaps a reference to Lord Castlereagh about whom you will read also in the Unit on Shelley); that he left his kingdom undone, that he was blind, etc. A satirist attempts to rectify the vices of the society in which he lives. While Byron, apparently ridicules the king alone, at times he hints at the shortcomings in the British people also. He points out that George left his subjects, ‘One half as mad — and other no less blind.’

The second and the third stanzas describe the melodrama that the funeral was. There was plenty of everything, velvet, gilding, brass, elegies, torches, cloaks, banners and heralds and dearth of only one thing—genuine sorrow for the deceased.

From the fourth through the seventh stanzas are the words of the Devil who has come to claim George from Michael at the Heaven Gate. Hence you find the king subjected to caustic satire. The ‘I’ of the first line of the fourth stanza refers to the Devil. His chief attack is on George’s attempt to establish personal rule in England. During his reign Britain’s American colonies became independent. Britain, both in trying to suppress the American colonies and Napoleon who was in the popular imagination a symbol of liberty, became the butt of Byron’s satire. Besides being a foe to liberty George had an insatiable thirst for gold. The sovereign besides was a tool in the hands of other people.

The last two lines of the seventh stanza make a transition to the main subject of the eighth, recounting, George’s virtues — ‘his household abstinence’, faithfulness to his wife, qualities as a father, etc. These the Devil admits would not have been seen as virtues in a person at a lower station in life. The two telling images that clinch the point are those of ‘Apicius’s board’ and ‘an anchorite’s supper.’
The last stanza shifts the focus of our attention from a dead British monarch to the monarchs of Europe who either as drones sleep on their thrones unmindful of their country’s plights or are despots who have refused to learn from the mistakes of the deceased monarch.

Byron’s satire thus has a noble intention, that is, of rectifying the sources of politico-administrative power of their ills. The sovereigns on the European thrones are George’s heirs, metaphorically speaking and Byron’s satire is directed at them also.

**Self-check Exercise III**

Do the following exercises in the space provided:

a) Read the first stanza and indicate the rhyme scheme.
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b) State briefly George III’s qualities as a person.
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c) What were the monarch’s shortcomings according to Byron?
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d) What in the short run was the aim of *The Vision of Judgment*?
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e) What in essence is Byron’s aim through the satire?
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13.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the life of Lord Byron and examined two excerpts from his poetry.

The first is from his epic poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* which is an account of Byron’s own travels on the continent and in Asia Minor. It is written in the Spenserian stanza and we hope that you can now scan the remaining stanzas of the poem yourself. Do the exercise with your counsellor at the Study Centre.

The second extract is from Byron’s satire on Southey and George III. You have seen how Byron had two or three goals behind writing *The Vision of Judgment* and how he fulfilled them.

We hope now you will try to read a few more poems of Byron you may find in anthologies or the collected works of Byron.

13.6 SUGGESTED READING

There is a good survey of Byron’s work in *Byron: A Survey* by Bernard Blackstone from which I have quoted a passage in this unit. *Byron’s Poetical Works* edited by Frederick Page and re-edited by John Jump has been published by the Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1970). R.K. Kaul has edited Byron’s *The Vision of Judgment* which is published by College Book Depot (Jaipur, 1965). *The Growth and Evolution of Classical Rhetoric* by A.B. Sharma (Delhi, Ajanta Books International, 1991) will be helpful in understanding the rhetorical devices used in the course generally and this unit particularly.

13.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise 1

1) See paragraph one of 13.2
2) 36 years
3) Read the 4th paragraph in 13.2 beginning—When Byron was three……

Self-check Exercise II

a) Paradox
The Romantic Poets

b) Anastrophe in ‘love not’ we normally say ‘don’t love’. Through the inversion the statement has been made more effective.

c) Parallelism in the two parts of the line in ideas and sound —called Isocolon.

d) Alliteration (repetition of ‘s’ sound)

e) Different words here express different ideas but of the same general kind. This is synthæsmus.

f) Unusual collocation in ‘oak leviathans’ for ship. ‘clay-creator’ for man. They are also metaphors.

g) Rhetorical question or Interrogatio.

h) Alliteration in ‘water washed’ and ellipsis in ‘them power’. The latter’s full form would be ‘washed them of their power’.

i) Alliteration.

j) Personification of ‘Time’ and ‘Dawn’.

k) Apostrophe.

Self-check Exercise III

a) a b a b a b c c

b) George took interest in British agriculture.

   He was a good husband.

   He was no tyrant.

c) George shielded tyrants (such as Castlereagh). He worked against freedom and liberty in America and against France.

d) It was meant to be a satire on Robert Southey who had attacked him in the first instance.

e) Byron perhaps wishes to improve monarchs of Europe and make them more sensitive to their subjects’ lives.
UNIT 14  P.B. SHELLEY

Structure
14.0 Objectives
14.1 Introduction
14.2 Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)
14.3 Ode to the West Wind
   14.3.1 The Background of the Poem
   14.3.2 The Text
   14.3.3 Analysis
   14.3.4 The Stanza Form
14.4 To A Skylark
   14.4.1 The Background of the Poem
   14.4.2 The Text
   14.4.3 Analysis
14.5 Let Us Sum Up
14.6 Suggested Reading
14.7 Answers to Self-Check Exercises

14.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:
- know about Shelley’s life and work;
- appreciate ‘Ode To The West Wind’; and
- ‘To A Skylark’.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we have discussed Shelley’s life and work because his eventful as well as unconventional life has influenced his writings and probably an understanding of his life may help you in analyzing and appreciating his poetry in general and the prescribed poems in particular.

The first poem ‘Ode to the West Wind’ is a lyric of great complexity and consummate artistic design. Shelley glorifies the west wind because it destroys to preserve, and his optimism is also evident in the last line, ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind’?

The second poem ‘To a Skylark’ is an impassioned invocation to the invisible bird which pours out its heart ‘In profuse strains of unpremeditated art and singing still dost sour and soaring ever singest’. It is a very famous lyric in which the poet glorifies the blissful life of the skylark, a heavenly bird, and contrasts her fate with human suffering.
14.2 PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792-1822)

P.B. Shelley was one of the greatest romantic poets of early nineteenth century. He was an uncompromising rebel. He continued his struggle for the cause of individual liberty, social justice and peace. He wished to bring social reforms by his inspiring and courageous works of literature. He dreamt of an ideal society in which there should be no slavery and no exploitation.

Shelley was born on 4 August 1792 at Field Place, Broadbridge Heath, near Horsham, West Sussex, England. He was the eldest legitimate son of Sir Timothy Shelley — a Whig Member of Parliament for Horsham from 1790-1792 and for Shoreham from 1806-1812; and Elizabeth Pilford, a Sussex landowner. Shelley had four younger sisters and one much younger brother. He received his early education at home, tutored by Reverend Evan Edwards of nearby Warnham. He spent a happy and contented childhood largely in country pursuits such as fishing and hunting.

In 1802, he entered the Syon House Academy of Brentford, Middlesex. In 1804, Shelley entered Eton College, where he performed poorly, and was subjected to an almost daily mob torment at around noon by older boys. Surrounded, the young Shelley would have his books torn from his hands and his clothes pulled at and torn until he cried out madly in his high-pitched voice. This daily misery could be attributed to Shelley’s refusal to take part in fagging and his indifference towards games and other youthful activities. These idiosyncrasies acquired him the nickname ‘Mad Shelley’.

On 10 April 1810, he matriculated at University College, Oxford. It is said that Shelley attended only one lecture while at Oxford, but often read sixteen hours a day. His first publication was a Gothic novel, Zastrozzi (1810), in which he voiced his early atheistic view through the villain Zastrozzi. In 1811, Shelley published his second Gothic novel, St. Irvyne and a pamphlet called The Necessity of Atheism. The latter gained the attention of the university administration and he was called to appear before the College’s fellows, including the Dean, George Rowley. His denial to disclaim the authorship of the pamphlet resulted in his expulsion from Oxford on 25 March 1811.

After four months of his expulsion from Oxford, on 28 August 1811 the nineteen year-old Shelley eloped to Scotland with the sixteen year-old Harriet Westbrook, a pupil at the same boarding school as Shelley’s sisters, whom his father had forbidden him to see. Harriet Westbrook had been writing Shelley passionate letters threatening to kill herself because of her unhappiness at the school and at home. Shelley, heartbroken after the failure of his romance with his cousin, Harriet Grove, cut off from his mother and sisters, impetuously decided to salvage Harriet Westbrook and make her his beneficiary. The Westbrooks pretended to object but secretly encouraged the elopement. Sir Timothy Shelley, however, annoyed that his son had married below his status cancelled Shelley’s allowance and refused ever to receive the couple at Field Place. Shelley was also at that time involved in an deep spiritual relationship with Elizabeth Hitchener, a twenty eight year-old unmarried school teacher whom Shelley called the ‘sister of my soul’ and “my second self”. She became his muse and soul mate in the writing of his philosophical poem Queen Mab.
Shelley was gradually unhappy with his marriage to Harriet and essentially disliked the influence of her older sister Eliza, who discouraged Harriet from breastfeeding their baby daughter. Shelley accused Harriet of having married him for his money. Longing for more intellectual female companionship, he initiated spending more time away from home, among other things, studying Italian with Cornelia Turner and visiting the home of William Godwin.

William Godwin had three highly educated daughters, two of whom, Fanny Imlay and Claire Clairmont, were his adopted step-daughters. Godwin’s first wife, the celebrated feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, had died giving birth to Godwin’s biological daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, named after her mother. Fanny had been the illegitimate daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and her lover, the diplomat speculator and writer, Gilbert Imlay. Claire was the illegitimate daughter of Godwin’s much younger second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont Godwin, whom Shelley considered a vulgar woman—not a proper person to form the mind of a young girl. Mary was being educated in Scotland when Shelley first became acquainted with the Godwin family. When she returned, Shelley fell madly in love with Mary.

On 28 July 1814, Shelley abandoned Harriet, though pregnant with their son Charles, he ran away to Switzerland with Mary, then sixteen, inviting her stepsister Claire Clairmont, who was also sixteen, along because she could speak French. The older sister Fanny, was left behind, to her great disappointment, for she, too, had fallen in love with Shelley. The three sailed to Europe, and made their way across France to Switzerland on foot. After six weeks, homesick and destitute, the three young people returned to England. In mid-1816, Shelley and Mary made a second trip to Switzerland. They were prompted to do this by Mary’s stepsister Claire Clairmont, who, in competition with her sister, had initiated a liaison with Lord Byron. Regular conversation with Byron had an invigorating effect on Shelley’s output of poetry. While on a boating tour the two took together, Shelley was inspired to write his *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, often considered his first significant production since *Alastor*.

After Shelley and Mary’s return to England, Fanny Imlay, Mary’s half-sister and Claire’s stepsister, despondent over her exclusion from the Shelley household and perhaps unhappy at being omitted from Shelley’s will, travelled from Godwin’s household in London to kill herself in Wales in early October. On 10 December 1816, the body of Shelley’s estranged wife Harriet was found in an advanced state of pregnancy, drowned in the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London. On 30 December 1816, a few weeks after Harriet’s body was recovered, Shelley and Mary Godwin were married.

Early in 1818, the Shelleys and Claire left England to take Claire’s daughter, Allegra, to her father Byron, who had taken up residence in Venice. In 1818 and 1819 Shelley’s son Will died of fever in Rome, and his infant daughter Clara Everina died during yet another household move. A baby girl, Elena Adelaide Shelley, was born on 27 December 1818 in Naples, Italy and registered there as the daughter of Shelley and a woman named ‘Marina Padurin’. However, the identity of the mother is an unsolved mystery. However, Elena was placed with foster parents a few days after her birth and the Shelley family moved on to yet another Italian city, leaving her behind. Elena died 17 months later, on 10 June 1820.
Shelley completed *Prometheus Unbound* in Rome, and he spent mid-1819 writing a tragedy, *The Cenci*, in Leghorn (Livorno). In this year, prompted among other causes by the Peterloo massacre, he wrote his best-known political poems: *The Masque of Anarchy* and *Men of England*. These were probably his best-remembered works during the 19th century. Around this time period, he wrote the essay *The Philosophical View of Reform*, which was his most thorough exposition of his political views.

In 1820, hearing of John Keats’ illness from a friend, Shelley wrote him a letter inviting him to join him at his residence at Pisa. Keats replied with hopes of seeing him, but instead, arrangements were made for Keats to travel to Rome with the artist Joseph Severn. Inspired by the death of Keats, in 1821 Shelley wrote the elegy *Adonais*. On 8 July 1822, less than a month before his 30th birthday, Shelley drowned in a sudden storm while sailing back from Leghorn (Livorno) to Lerici in his boat, *Don Juan*. He was returning from having set up *The Liberal* (*a magazine*) with the newly arrived Leigh Hunt.

Shelley’s most remarkable poems are *Ozymandias, Ode to the West Wind, To a Skylark, Music, When Soft Voices Die, The Cloud* and *The Masque of Anarchy*. His other major works include long, visionary poems such as *Queen Mab, Alastor, The Revolt of Islam, Adonais*, the unfinished work *The Triumph of Life*; and the visionary verse dramas *The Cenci* (1819) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

### Self-check Exercise 1

a) When was Shelley born? How was his childhood?

b) Why was Shelley expelled from Oxford University?

c) When and where did Shelley die?
14.3 ODE TO THE WEST WIND

14.3.1 The Background of the Poem

In order to know the background of the composition of Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, it is relevant to know what the poet says in this regard. The poem was inspired by his life at Arno near Florence in 1819. Shelley’s note says: ‘This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresew, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to cisalpine regions’. His mythopoetic imagination seized on scientific facts and phenomena and transformed them into beautiful images; his iconoclastic intellect tore at all outdated and meaningless conventions of society, religion and politics. His revolutionary zeal burns through his great ‘Ode to the West Wind’.

14.3.2 The Text

O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,
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 charioteest 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 preservers; hear, O, hear!

II

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,

Angles of rain and lightening; there are spread
On the blue surface of thine airy 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: O, hear!

III

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 sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice and suddenly grow grey with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: O, hear!

IV

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 skiey speed  
Scarce seemed a vision, I would ne’er have striven  

As thou with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.  

V  

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?  

Glossary  

Hectic red : an unhealthy red as though flushed with fever.  
Winged seeds : seeds with wing-like growths which enable them to be blown away and scattered.  
Azure sister : the warm west wind (the Zephyrus of the Poets) which blows from the clear blue skies.  
Clarion : trumpet. The spring wind wakes them up as the angel blows its trumpet to summon the dead on the Judgment day.  
Destroyer and preserver : The West Wind combines in himself the role of destroyer & preserver: it destroys the old decaying leaves; it scatters the seeds and thus preserves life.  
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean : The whole universe should be shaken up—the air and the sea as well as the earth, both horizontally and vertically. The Wind seems to let loose the clouds as he blows off the dead leaves.
The locks: the rain clouds are the wind’s locks of hair.

Thou dirge: The sound of the wind becomes a funeral song (dirge) for the dying year; the dark clouds become the dome of a vast tomb (sepulcher). The forces of destruction will erupt from these ruins. The poet prophesies the destruction of an old order and the birth of a new one.

O, hear!: The poet seems to warn us with a prophetic zeal.

his: the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is a symbolical of the wealthy aristocracy who live a voluptuous life of indolence cut off from the living stream of reform and change.

coil: murmur. The word generally means commotion or tumult.

Crystalline: clear and transparent

intenser day: clearer light.

azure: blue.

the Atlantic level powers: the smooth waters of the Atlantic ocean.

While far below……

While far below……

despoil themselves: Shelley’s own note may be given in explanation: “This phenomenon…is well-known to naturalists. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers and of lakes, sympathizes with that of the land in the change of the seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it.”

oozy woods: the vegetation on the oozy bed (the soft mud at the bottom) of the sea.

despoil themselves: deprive themselves; they change colour and fall off even as the leaves shed themselves from trees in winter.

O, hear!: The first three stanzas end on this note of prophetic warning: the poet calls upon the powers of the earth, the sky and the sea to listen the clarion call of reform and change.

When to outstrip….Vision: In my boyhood I did not consider it a mere vision to go faster than you”(west wind).

Skiey speed: your speed through the sky.

Make me thy lyre: Let me be the poet of revolution, reform and change.

Be thou me: Here the poet identifies himself completely with the tumultuous west wind.
If winter comes...behind?:

The poem begins in a tone of impatient indignation and then passes on to a state of utter helplessness and sadness but ends on a note of hope. Gloom will be followed by hope as surely as winter will be followed by spring.

14.3.3 Analysis

The poet invokes the wild West Wind of autumn, which scatters the dead leaves and spreads seeds so that they may be nurtured by the spring, and asks that the wind, a ‘destroyer and preserver,’ hear him. He calls the wind the ‘dirge / Of the dying year,’ and describes how it stirs up violent storms, and again implores it to hear him. The poet says that the wind stirs the Mediterranean from “his summer dreams,” and cleaves the Atlantic into choppy Chasm.

The second section of the poem deals with the sky. Like withered leaves, the loose clouds fall from the unseen forests of the heaven into the river of the west wind. Suddenly, the imagery of the leaves is replaced by the human imagery. The clouds become hair of a huge giant. The west wind then becomes transformed into a mournful tune. And the rapidly encroaching night becomes the dome of an extensive sepulchre, canopied by the unifying power of the west wind.

The third section presents the effects of the wind on the sea. Here the placid Mediterranean is personified- asleep, dreaming of old palaces and towers which are only reflections. The west wind drives away unreal thoughts of the Mediterranean Sea. The under-water vegetation feels the arrival of the wind and sheds the leaves.

The poet says that if he were a dead leaf that the wind could bear, or a cloud it could carry, or a wave it could push, or even if he were, as a boy, “the comrade” of the wind’s ‘wandering over heaven,’ then he would never have needed to pray to the wind and invoke its powers. He pleads with the wind to lift him “as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!”—for though he is like the wind at heart, untamable and proud—he is now chained and bowed with the weight of his hours upon the earth.

The poet asks the wind to ‘make me thy lyre,’ to be his own Spirit, and to drive his thoughts across the universe, ‘like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth.’ He asks the wind, by the incantation of this verse, to scatter his words among mankind, to be the “trumpet of a prophecy.” Speaking both in regard to the season and in regard to the effect upon mankind that he hopes his words to have.

The last section of the poem presents the details of this identification sought to be established between the poet and the west wind. He desires to become the mouth piece of the west wind, as the forest is the lyre on which it plays the rustling tune. He asks the west wind to drive his old dead ideas which will form the manure to help the blossoming forth of new conceptions. The poet wants that the prophetic note of the west wind should spread throughout the world through his mouth. The optimistic prophecy, ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind’? makes the poem full of optimism and new hopes.

In short, Shelley invokes the wind magically, describing its power and its role as both ‘destroyer and preserver,’ and asks the wind to sweep him out of his torpor...
The Romantic Poets

‘as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!’ In the fifth section, the poet then takes a remarkable turn, transforming the wind into a metaphor for his own art, the expressive capacity that drives ‘dead thoughts’ like ‘withered leaves’ over the universe, to ‘quicken a new birth’—that is, to quicken the coming of the spring. Here the spring season is a metaphor for a “spring” of human consciousness, imagination, liberty, or morality—all the things Shelley hoped his art could help to bring about in the human mind. Shelley asks the wind to be his spirit, and in the same movement he makes it his metaphorical spirit, his poetic faculty, which will play him like a musical instrument, the way the wind strums the leaves of the trees.

14.3.4 The Stanza Form

Each of the five parts of ‘Ode to the West Wind’ contains five stanzas—four three-line stanzas and a two-line couplet, all metered in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme in each part follows a pattern known as terza rima, the three-line rhyme scheme employed by Dante in his Divine Comedy. In the three-line terza rima stanza, the first and third lines rhyme, and the middle line does not; then the end sound of that middle line is employed as the rhyme for the first and third lines in the next stanza. The final couplet rhymes with the middle line of the last three-line stanza. Thus, each part of ‘Ode to the West Wind’ follows this scheme: ABA BCB CDC DED EE.

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<th>Self-check Exercise II</th>
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<tr>
<td>Answer the following questions in the given space:</td>
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<td>a) What is the rhyme scheme in the first stanza of the poem?</td>
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b) Why does the poet call the west wind destroyer and preserver?

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c) ‘Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!'  
   I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed’!

   Explain the meaning of these lines in your own words.

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   d) ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind’? What does the poet want to convey?

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   e) Give two examples of simile and one example of personification being used in the poem *Ode to the West Wind*.

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### 14.4 TO A SKYLARK

#### 14.4.1 The Background of the Poem

The sources and influences which stimulated Shelley’s imagination when he composed the Skylark are not merely significant in themselves, but also essential in understanding its meaning. Let us see the natural observations which led Shelley to compose his poem ‘To A Skylark’. From June 15 to August 5, 1820, Shelley, Mary, and Claire Clairmont stayed at Casa Ricci, the Leghorn home of John and Maria Gisborne. In a note of 1839 Mrs. Shelley says: ‘In the spring we spent a week or two near Leghorn, borrowing the house of some friends, who were absent on a journey to England. It was on a beautiful summer evening while wandering among the lanes, whose myrtle hedges were the bowers of the fireflies, that we heard the caroling of the skylark, which inspired one of his most beautiful poems’.
14.4.2 The Text

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it
Pour'est thy full heart
In profuse strain of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of heaven,
In the broad daylight
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight.

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere,
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear,
Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and heaven is overflow'd.

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see,
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a poet hidden,
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not;

Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower;

Like a glow-worm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbeholden
Its aerial hue
Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view;

Like a rose embower’d
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflower’d,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet these heavy-winged thieves:

Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awaken’d flowers,
All that ever was
Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass.

Teach us, sprite or bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine;
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine;

Chorus hymeneal,
Or triumphal chaunt,
Match’d with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be:
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest - but ne’er knew love’s sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?
The Romantic Poets

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet if we could scorn
Hate, and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorners of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world should listen then, as I am listening now!

Glossary

blithe spirit...... Bird thou
never wert
the Skylark is symbolical of the Romantic poet
who considers poetry as “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.”
Cp. Wordsworth’s To the Skylark:
“Thou dost pour upon the world a flood of harmony.”
you fly across the blue sky.
At its great height the bird is invisible;
therefore it seems to be an ‘unbodied joy’.
before the misery of the world has crowed upon him.
even
the shafts of the light or rays from the silver-white Venus. By implication, it may also mean the shafts of love. The bright planet shrinks and finally becomes invisible in the growing light of day.
A poet keeps himself in the background but allows his thoughts to flash out over the world. It was Shelley’s own wish to stir the world with human sympathy and hope to
To rouse it from its callous indifference to oppression and misery.

unbidden : spontaneously.
deflowered : ravished; robbed of their flowers or their scent.

heavy winged thieves : the winds laden with scent and moving slowly.
spirit or bird : whether you are a bird or a spirit.
chorus hymeneal : songs of marriage; Hymen, in classical mythology is the god of marriage.
empty vaunt : mere boast.
joyance : joy, rejoicing (poetic and archaic).
languor : indifference (i.e. to the problems of life).
satiety : excess to the point of disgust.

14.4.3 Analysis

In the poem ‘To a Skylark’ the poet has addressed a skylark (little bird) that soars up at a great height and sings so sweetly that the world is enchanted and bewitched by its sweetness. The skylark symbolizes high imagination, eternal happiness and harbinger of peace and progress. It is a spirit. Though it is unseen, yet it pours forth profuse sweetness. It stands for idealism and newly built society – free from corruption, exploitation and economic slavery. The Skylark’s sweet note and ideal message spread everywhere in the atmosphere. It is heard by the poet who is highly impressed. He boldly claims that the skylark is a superior thing in the sky. The cloud, the stars, the moon, the sun – all are left behind and the skylark dominates by its excellent tune and soothing voice.

The poet himself does not know what the skylark actually is. The mystery of the Skylark is still unsolved to the poet. But he is sure of the fact that he can learn a message of welfare from it and can spread in the world for recreation of the society. The poet had drawn beautiful comparison. In such comparison, he has proved his imaginative quality and an extraordinary talent.

He has compared the beauty and sweetness of the skylark to a highly born beautiful girl who lives in her tower like palatial building and sings sweet love songs. Similarly, its comparison with golden glow-worm among the flowers and grass and with rose having soothing scent is excellent and befitting. The poet is so confident about the sweetness and joy of Skylark’s song that he says that even the rainbow clouds do not spread as bright drops as the presence of the skylark spreads a rain of melody. In short, the music of the Skylark surpasses every pleasure of nature.

The poet wishes to get instruction and messages from the skylark. So he asks it to teach him its sweet thoughts. The poet is confident that the skylark is pouring out a flood of rapture which is divine.

The line, “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought” is very meaningful. It tells the philosophy of Shelley’s life. What Shelley wants to convey here is that we like a song dealing with pleasure no doubt but it has a
transitory effect. We forget the happy moments of life very soon. It does not impress us for long. But on the other hand, tragedy of life leaves a powerful stamp on our life. It becomes eternal in its appeal because it affects our heart emotionally. We are lovers of tragedy because we cannot escape it. Sorrow is part and parcel of human life. Naturally, sad thoughts impress us in a greater degree than happy thoughts we like to sing or listen to a tragic song more eagerly than a pleasant song.

The skylark scorns the nasty habits of the earth and stands for bliss, joy and prosperity of the world. The poet is of cosmopolitan outlook. He is restless to preach his idealism in the world. Therefore he earnestly requests the skylark to teach him the message.

Some critics say that P.B Shelley was not a practical man. He was far away from realism. So his skylark always flew higher and higher and did not come to the earth, like the skylark of Wordsworth. Shelley’s skylark can achieve perfection because it is ‘scorner of the ground’. This is where we find the difference of attitude of the two Romantic poets, Shelley and Wordsworth. Shelley’s skylark is an inhabitant of purely ethereal world and is a symbol of perfection. On the other hand, Wordsworth’s skylark in his poem ‘To the Skylark’ is an inhabitant of both earth and ether: ‘Type of the wise who soar, but never roam; /True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home’!

On the whole, ‘To a Skylark’ is one of the best lyrics of P. B. Shelley. The flow of art, the similes, the flight of imagination and lyrical quality make this poem unparalleled in romantic poetry.

**Self-check Exercise III**

Now you have already read the poem ‘To a Skylark’. Answer the following questions in the space provided:

a) Why does the poet address the skylark ‘a blithe spirit’?

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b) Explain the expression ‘profuse strains of unpremeditated art’.

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c) Explain the simile ‘Like a cloud of fire’.
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d) ‘Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun’—Explain.
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f) ‘Like a poet hidden/In the light of thought’. Explain the simile used by the poet.
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g) ‘Teach us, spirit or bird...a flood of rapture so divine’—why does the poet say so?
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h) ‘We look before and after...Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts’. Explain the meaning.
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14.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you have read Shelley’s life and work with a focus on his poetic genius. You have also read about Terza Rima which has been used in his ‘Ode to the West Wind’ successfully. Finally, you have gone through his two famous poems carefully and critically. Now you are able to analyse and discuss Shelley’s poetry in general and the two poems in particular.

14.6 SUGGESTED READING


14.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

a) See second paragraph of 14.2
b) See fifth paragraph of 14.2
c) On 8 July 1822 Shelley drowned in a sudden storm while sailing back from Leghorn to Lerici in his boat.
d) See last paragraph of 14.2
e) John Keats and Lord Byron

Self-check Exercise II

a) aba bcb cdc ded ee.
b) See glossary ‘Destroyer and preserver’
c) See fourth paragraph of 14.3.3
d) See the sixth paragraph of 14.3.3
e) Read critically any stanza of ‘Ode to the West Wind’.

i) What is the difference between Shelley’s skylark and that of Wordsworth?

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Self-check Exercise III

a) Shelley is listening to the song of a bird, which is itself invisible. It seems to the poet that the bird, while singing, soaring high above the ground, has lost its physical existence and has become a spirit.

b) The birds are ‘unpremeditated’, that is, natural or spontaneous in the sense that those are not preconceived or pre-planned, unlike the human art, generally, or more specifically, the poet’s art, which is preconceived.

c) The skylark in its venture up in the sky is compared to a cloud lit up by the rays of the setting sun at twilight. Shelley links the bird to the image of fire in order to emphasise the bird’s abstract existence as a quality having the power to purify the human mind.

d) Shelley seeks to convey the idea that in its flight for singing, the bird, as if, has found a new life, a life of abstract delight which is possible only by transcending the body and becoming a spirit.

e) In a poem the presence of the poet can be felt in the radiance of the thoughts and ideas s/he intends to convey to the reader. As a poet remains physically absent yet spiritually present in a poem, the skylark remains hidden in the sky while singing.

f) The poet is very much pained to find his own world filled with sorrows and anxieties whereas the skylark remains untouched and unaffected by all these things. To him the bird is a bodiless embodiment of joy, and that is why he seeks inspiration of “sweet thoughts” in its song.

g) What Shelley wants to convey here is that we like a song dealing with pleasure no doubt but it has a transitory effect. We forget the happy moments of life very soon. It does not impress us for long. But on the other hand, tragedy of life leaves a powerful stamp on our life. It becomes eternal in its appeal because it affects our heart emotionally. We are lovers of tragedy because we cannot escape it. Sorrow is part and parcel of human life. Naturally, sad thoughts impress us in a greater degree than happy thoughts we like to sing or listen to a tragic song more eagerly than a pleasant song.

h) Wordsworth’s skylark in his poem ‘To the Skylark’ is a creature of flesh and blood, while Shelley’s skylark is a philosophical abstraction. It despises the cares and anxieties of the world while Wordsworth’s has its eyes fixed on its nest on the ground.
UNIT 15  JOHN KEATS

Structure
15.0  Objectives
15.1  Introduction
15.2  John Keats (1795-1821)
15.3  ‘Ode On A Grecian Urn’
   15.3.1  The Background of the Poem
   15.3.2  The Text
   15.3.3  A Discussion
15.4  ‘Ode to A Nightingale’
   15.4.1  The Background of the Poem
   15.4.2  The Text
   15.4.3  A Discussion
15.5  Let Us Sum Up
15.6  Answers to Self-Check Exercises

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
fed the poetic enthusiasm in Keats. In 1817 he published his first volume of verse, which in spite of the championship of Hunt, could attract little notice. After the publication, he went to the Isle of Wight and the suburbs of London, where his affliction might be remedied and free him from distractions. But it ill-suited his temperament and he returned to London. By the end of this year he completed the first draft of Endymion. While he was staying there he was acquainted with Fanny Browne, and afterwards was engaged to her for a time. His physical problem, however, became worse, and the mental and physical distress caused by his complaint, added to despair regarding the success of his love affair, produced a frantic state of mind painfully reflected in his letters to the young lady. These letters were printed (1878), long after the poet’s death.

His second volume of verse, published in 1818, was brutally assailed by the *Quarterly Review* and by *Blackwood’s Magazine*. The reaction towards Endymion was also quite unfavorable. “Keats association with Hunt was sufficient in itself in certain quarters to discredit him; for Hunt’s political radicalism had made him odious to the great Tory reviews”. (Compton- Rickett, 1989) Keats bore the attack with apparent serenity, and always protested that he minded it little; but there can be little doubt that it affected his health to some degree and it is believed that he took such assaults of the critics deeply to his heart. In 1820, he was compelled to seek warmer skies, and died in Rome early in the next year, at the age of twenty-five.

### 15.2 JOHN KEATS (1795-1821)

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 wholeheartedly 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**: sensuous

**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
The Romantic Poets

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 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. 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
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 Poesythe 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 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.
   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?
   Ans: Refer to the second paragraph of Section 15.3.3.

c) Discuss how the poet defines art to be eternal?
   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 Ode to a Nightingale?
   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?
   Ans: Refer to the second last paragraphs of Sections 15.4.4

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