



## Ode to Autumn – A Close Reading

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### Introduction

An Ode is a long lyric poem, serious in subject, elevated in style and elaborate in its stanzaic structure. Keats' great Odes have immortalized his name---*Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to Melancholy* and *Ode to Autumn* to name a few of them. These stand testimony to his marvellous poetic creativity.

The Odes of Keats created a new class of lyrical poetry with imaginative richness and eloquence of feeling and passion, pulsating with beauty, truth and joy which life revealed to his poetical genius. 1820 forms the *Annus Mirabilis* of Keats' poetic creativity as all his odes were written around 1819, and published at this time. Robert Bridges in *John Keats: A Critical Essay* writes: "had Keats left us only his Odes, his rank among the poets would not be lower than it is, for they have stood apart in literature". He breathes "the spirit of Shakespeare", avers A.C. Bradley in 'Oxford Lectures on Poetry'.

*Ode to Autumn*, the last ode written by him is a Horatian ode ---- calm, meditative and philosophic.

The characteristics of Keats' poetry are: Nature, Beauty, Hellenism, Romance and personal poetic mood. These are found in the odes in different measure. *Ode to Autumn* can be classed as an ode on Nature and presents the principle of beauty in Nature. Autumn is described as "chaste weather" in one of his letters to Reynolds. In this ode he paints the Bounty and Beauty of the Autumn season and describes it as "seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness". The features of the season are delineated with vivid pictorial quality and the poem is like a moving pageant or living tableaux, affecting our senses with various impressions. It is unique because usually poets glorify the Spring season; very often Autumn has been deplored as the dying season when the harvest has been reaped and the fields are bare, the trees begin to shed their leaves and flowers wither in anticipation of Winter snow, when Nature seems dead with the trees bare of leaf and creatures hibernating.

### Poem Analysis

Stanza I :- The Ode opens with an address to Autumn: "seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness" and describes the bounty of Nature. Autumn and the Sun are personified as two good friends putting their heads together to load and bless the Vegetative world--- the fruit vines, the apple trees, the gourd and hazel shells are ripening with fruit, and honey flowers abound. The bees, representative of the Insect world, have their whole existence bound up with flowers and are blessed with abundant nectar of late blossoming flowers: "until they think/ warm days will never cease". The bounty of Nature flows abundantly and this treasure is described as "o'erbrimmed". These picturesque descriptions appeal to sight. Tactile imagery is suggested by the words "warm" days and "clammy" cells full of honey; Gustatory imagery is present in the "sweet" taste of the hazel nut. Keats' poetry is known for its sensuous quality. Graham Hough in *The Romantic Poets* states: "sensuous beauty and meditation on sensuous beauty was the central experience of his life. It is in the Odes that he explores this most fully...".

Stanza II :- presents a series of Personifications of Autumn as a bounty giver with "thy store" or Mother Nature with her long hair lifted by the wind ; as a Harvester sitting on the granary floor; as a Reaper cutting the harvest ; as a Gleaner carrying the farm produce in baskets on her head ; as a Cyder-maker extracting patiently the juice of fruits. Visual imagery is evoked as we witness a series of live pageants moving before our eyes. Tactile imagery and Kinaesthetic imagery (of movement) is evoked in the "oozings" of juice pressed out; Olfactory imagery (of smell) is evoked in the "fume of poppies" which have a drowsy effect on the Reaper.

Stanza III :- celebrates the music of Autumn---the day is "soft-dying", the sun is mellow and low on the horizon and the fields are covered with rosy, pleasing colours and give a sense of ease and comfort; the gnats "mourn" a "wailful" chorus as if anticipating winter and harsh weather; the lambs "bleat", the hedge-crickets "sing", the swallows "twitter" and the red-breasted bird "whistles" a high-pitched but sweet song. These are rare references to the sounds of Nature in Autumn season: the Auditory imagination and Aural imagery are presented. In his Sonnet, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, Keats wrote: "the Poetry of earth is never dead." Selincourt writes in his *Oxford Lectures on English Poetry*, how Keats possessed all the qualities of the movement of Romanticism dominated by Wordsworth and Coleridge, but "of them all he was the most richly endowed with the nature and temperament of the artist. Never was a poet more alert to detect beauty nor more quickly responsive to its apparition". All that he read and saw became an imaginative experience, a sensation and he would identify with its spirit. Keats wrote how "if a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel" (*Letters: XXII*). When his passion for the beautiful became creative "his instinct took him to the great tradition, and he found voice in a magical felicity of phrase that none but Shakespeare or Milton has equalled", explains Selincourt.

*Ode to Autumn* is Keats' last Ode and reflects his mature thinking, expressing a ripe and wise outlook on life. His personal miseries (loss of parents in early life, brother's death, his star-crossed love for Fanny Brawne and the terrible disease that ravaged his body and negatively impacted his life) carved him out into a perfect poet who could empathize with others and reflect universal truths and emotions in his poetry. The more Keats suffered, the greater was his poetry. This worshipper of Beauty was not an escapist from the harsh realities of life. Rather he said the proper role of poetry is to "be a friend/ To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man" (*Sleep and Poetry*). Keats leaves us with the highest message:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*).

Life and death, happiness and misery are of the rhythm of life; they are necessary to build a wise, balanced perspective on life. A mood of reconciliation prevails and the Ode breathes a happy and tranquil spirit. Nature has carved him out to be a great poet.

The "mists", "mellow" and "maturing" of Autumn season suggest the natural culmination of the year when the process that started in Spring has come to its natural conclusion. The regeneration of Nature in Spring season after the cold frosty winter chill, the bringing back to life, a renewal of creation and creativity has now reached its stage of completion in the form of ripened fruit and corn. Without Autumn, the Spring season has no meaning---just as without the proper fruit or result, the human effort is without purpose and loses its charm. Autumn is not perceived as a time of decay, rather it is seen as a time of ripeness and fulfilment. Likewise, the mature poet in Keats has received the Bounty of Nature as his great poetic gift amidst the harsh vicissitudes of his life. The rich slow movement of the verse and other odes with their exquisite sensuousness and meditative depth, are among the greatest achievements of Romantic poetry. *Ode to Autumn* "is the most perfect in form and detail of the Odes....the most purely objective and descriptive. The emotion has become completely fused with the object, and expresses itself completely through it", in the words of Graham Hough.

## Keats' Concept of Beauty and Soul-Making; He is of Shakespeare's Tribe

In a letter to his brother, George, he wrote about "the mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty in all things... the yearning Passion I have for the beautiful, connected and made one with the ambition of my intellect" (*Letters: LXXIII*). It is a deeply contemplative mood when the creative imagination of the poet is transforming its transitory worldly experiences into a work of art--- that which is eternally beautiful, imparting pleasure, is of perennial interest as it is the truthful representation of the various phenomena of life and thereby uplifts the human spirit with its perfection of utterance. In his letter to Bailey, Keats wrote: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth" (*Letters: XXII*). In this Letter, Keats articulated that: "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream, --- he awoke and found it truth... Adam's dream... seems to be a Conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection, is the same as human life and its spiritual repetition". The imaginative mind in its silent working, comes "on the Spirit with a fine Suddenness"... "it is necessary to your eternal happiness that you not only drink this old Wine of Heaven...but also increase in knowledge and know all things" (*Letters: XXII*).

"He was of Shakespeare's tribe", avows A.C. Bradley in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. In his analysis of "The Letters of Keats", Bradley writes how they reveal an "intellectual power which rarely fails to accompany poetic genius"; further that "the mind of Keats was very serious and thoughtful. It was original...in quality" like "the mind of Shakespeare". He cared nothing for theories, abstractions, or ideals. For Keats, poetry is "not mere luxury and rapture, it is a deed", explains Bradley. The poet progresses from the tangible, visible and audible beautiful sensations and the joy in them to an emphatic belief: "the human heart is something finer---not its dreams, but its actions and its anguish". Pain and suffering are native to life in this world: "beauty is manifested in suffering and conflict". Keats' creative and poetic journey is one from the 'luxury' of sensuous Beauty to that which is the "second and more difficult kind is also the higher, the fuller, the nearer to the Principle of Beauty" that he cherished and sought deeply. The joy of beauty simple and sweet, then, is not the only word. In his early poem *Sleep and Poetry* Keats asks himself the question:

"...can I ever bid these joys farewell?"

And he answers:

"Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
Of human hearts."

Keats' Letters written to his family and friends are of great value in understanding the poet's evolution and creative journey. In a letter to his brother, George, Keats expressed his belief that Life is "the vale of Soul-making": the Heart is "the Mind's Bible, it is the Mind's experience, it is the text from which the Mind or Intelligence sucks its identity". The experiences in this World or elemental space provide an arena for the interaction of Mind and Heart to form the "Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity" and "thus does God make individual beings". Further he explains that "Intelligences are atoms of perception--- they know, and they see and they are pure". Such are "Souls, identical Souls, of the sparks of his own essence". Keats arrives intuitively at such "a system of Salvation", a "system of Spirit-creation" (*Letters: XCII*). Keats idolized Shakespeare as the poetic genius and 'soul' par excellence; Middleton Murray in *Keats and Shakespeare*, notes Keats' "deeper identification of himself with Shakespeare". He is in awe of the quality "which Shakespeare possessed so enormously---I mean Negative Capability" and because of which he "is the ideal of human character". Reading *King Lear*, Keats finds it "the ideal of poetic excellence" because of its intensity which makes "all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth" (*Letters: XXIV*). The poetry of Shakespeare reveals his intensity of experiences, comprehension of pain and suffering of the world, and is informed by "High reason and the love of good and ill", his self-abnegation before the vastness of life, its mysterious and magical quality, a comprehension of the beauty of life, a beauty which is the truth of Life. Agony and conflict mould the soul of Keats, and are

set-up above luxurious loveliness and impart an intensity of experience to his poetry and it has “that sort of fire in it that must take hold of people” (*Lamia*). To his publisher and friend, Taylor, he wrote that poetry “should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance” (Letters: XXXIX).

Keats believed that the poet is to do good by his poetry. Bradley proclaims: “To make beauty is his philanthropy”.

A worshipper of Beauty...the "Principle of Beauty" is the central axiom of the poetry of Keats. Beauty is of two kinds, that which appeals to the senses and delights us; the other kind is won through thought and through pain and is "the higher, the fuller, the nearer to the Principle". Though it seems he prizes and exalts 'sensation' and decries thought or knowledge, it actually stands for "poetic sensation", or as Keats explained "it was a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a truth" (Letters: XXXII). In this quest for Truth, Keats had the intuitive conviction that 'thought', 'knowledge', 'philosophy' and pain are necessary contributory elements. He believed the poet is to do good, yet his poetry should not work with an ostensible design on his reader. The poet should have "Negative Capability" as that of Shakespeare, the capability of “bearing uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”. Keats called the true poet a "chameleon" ---- the poetical character "has no self—It is everything and nothing--- It has no character---It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen ... A poet is “the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity-- he is continually in, for, and filling some other body” (Letters: LXXVI). The poet must efface himself, identify with his subject, surrender to the sensation evoked, without trying to intellectualize it or indoctrinate; rather, delving into the dark or bright side of life is rewarding, as both end in speculation and philosophical understandings. The poet has acquired “soul-knowledge of the universe as a harmony” of, and love of good and ill. This poetic instinct is the hallmark of the pure poet that was Shakespeare. So is Keats the “pure poet” --- aver Bradley, Matthew Arnold, Robert Bridges and Middleton Murray to name a few famous men of letters. Graham Hough says the Odes are "supreme examples of Negative Capability".

Matthew Arnold too has written how Keats' letters reveal his character as having “admirable wisdom and temper” and the “strength and clearness of judgment” equally in matters of friendship, in being self-critical of his poems, of public reception and of the literary circles of his times. Keats idolized Shakespeare as the greatest poetic genius. He knew himself as a poet and hoped to be a great one: "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death” (Letters: LXXIII). Arnold was emphatic in his belief “He is; he is with Shakespeare”. Further Keats' work was: "not imitative, indeed, of Shakespeare, but Shakespearian, because its expression has that rounded perfection and felicity of loveliness of which Shakespeare is the great master”. Keats’ “master-passion” for the Beautiful was “an intellectual and spiritual passion” (*Essays in Criticism*).

*Ode to Autumn* is Keats' swan-song and breathes an air of tranquillity, his poetic soul finds "perfect expression", in Keats’ own phrase about his last days of great suffering and misery --- in his “posthumous existence”, writes Selincourt. The gathering swallows, harbingers of winter, bring no sorrow to his heart. Keats’, poetic Imagination has realized the immortality of the "Principle of Beauty" in all things – not mere sensuous beauty, but Beauty as a symbol and prophecy of a comprehension of human life to which mankind can attain :-

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases: it will never  
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep  
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing” (*Endymion*).

# The Romantic Vision and its Relevance Today

The Odes offer "value permanently accessible to the individual" in the words of Graham Hough.

The Romantic Movement, its spirit and characteristics have been explained and variously defined ---- as the "Renaissance of Wonder" by Theodore Watt Dunton ; by Walter Pater as "the addition of strangeness to beauty" ; by Abercrombie as "a withdrawal from outer experience and concentration on inner experience" ; C.M. Bowra writes how the Romantics were "concerned with the things of the spirit" and were in search of an "unseen world"; while Scott-James describes Classicism as "this worldliness" and Romanticism as "other worldliness". The *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* describes this new style of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, lays stress on Fancy and Imagination and treats of Nature as a "transcendent presence", and which will speak of personal feelings, will glorify the beauty and bounty of Nature as well as childhood and the spiritual aspects of life.

Graham Hough cautions us: "the Romantic movement does hold out a living hand to us, and not to grasp it is a kind of intellectual and emotional treason". He perceives the outcome of its deliberate rejection in our times as resulting "in the present decay of creation, and the desiccation of much of our criticism" and the reabsorption of these nineteenth -century values as "needed for the mental health" of our times.

## Suggested Readings:---

- A.C. Bradley --- *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. London: Macmillan,1965.  
Christopher J. Murray (ed.)—*Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760-1850* (2 vols.,2004).  
Matthew Arnold-----*Essays in Criticism, Second Series*. London: Macmillan,1888.  
J. Middleton Murray--- *Keats and Shakespeare*. London: OUP,1925.  
Marshall Brown (ed)--*The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol.5 :Romanticism* (2000).  
Graham Hough--- *The Romantic Poets*. Hutchinson Univ. Library,1953.  
E. de Selincourt—*Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. London: OUP,1934.  
Robert Bridges ---*John Keats, A Critical Essay*. London: Lawrence & Bullen,1895.  
Sidney Colvin (ed)--- *Letters of John Keats*. London: Macmillan,1925.