

STUDY MANUAL FOR SEM 4 ENGLISH HONOURS

Ode to Autumn by John Keats

- The *Ode to Autumn*, composed on September, 1819, was the last of Keats' GREAT ODES.
- Set in the transitional season of Autumn which continues from the plenitude of summer and leads to the death of Nature in the winter season, the poem focuses on all the key dichotomies of Keatsian odes – transience and permanence, mutability and immutability, life and death.
- Like all the other ROMANTIC poets, Keats too idealized Nature. But being a sensualist, he was as much drawn to the metaphysical and the abstract as to the physical and the concrete. His ode addresses the season as a personified entity and explores its dynamics through shifting TEMPORAL and SPATIAL planes.
- The first canto opens the movement of the season in close collaboration with the “maturing sun”, like a deity belonging to the fertility cult. A series of lush imagery from the cottage gardens is used to build the impression of ABUNDANCE and FECUNDITY in Nature. The thatch-eaves laden with ripe fruits, the apple trees bent with the weight of fruits, the flowers that keep on blooming in spite of the onset of autumn, and the climactic image of the bee-hives cramming with honey – all work together to create the impression of the ripeness of summer spilling over into the autumn season and setting in an effect of LINGERING CONTINUATION of summer. Onomatopoeic expressions like “load and bless”, “swell”, “plump” etc. convey the sense of the rotundity and the weightiness of the ripe fruits. Alliterative expressions like “For summer has o’rbrimm’d her clammy cells” appeal to tactile, auditory as well as visual senses.
- The second canto shifts to mid-autumn, visualizing the season in terms of a series of persona engaged in different agricultural activities. [A winnower “sitting careless on a granary floor”, a reaper asleep on a “half-reap’d furrow”, a gleaner balancing her load “across a brook”, a cyder-presser watching the “last ooings, hours by hours”]. A sense of satiety which is the logical after-effect of the overwhelming plenitude in Nature is created resulting in lethargy and casual indolence – compounded by the reference to poppies. The use of vowel sounds prolong the lines, building a mood of absolute relaxation which culminates in the concluding phrase of the canto “hours by hours” which reiterates the sense of a phase over-stretching itself into a LIMITLESS CONTINUUM.
- The third canto is launched with an interrogation that posits the season against the idealized perfection of Nature epitomized in the spring season. But almost immediately the poet refuses to continue this line of thought. He shifts his attention to the unique music of autumn created by the symphony of the gnats, full-grown lambs, hedge crickets, robin, swallows and the river sallows. The “wailful choir” creates a sombre despondent music which is a befitting prelude to the death that will be coming in winter.

- The crucial point in this ode is Keats' final acceptance of the binaries that characterize life. In his previous odes the poet had been caught in an unresolved dilemma between the warm passion of REALITY and the passionless coldness of the IDEAL. The Grecian urn remains a "cold pastoral" for instance, lifeless and inert in spite of its eternal, unfading beauty. No matter how many times he repeats the word "happy", the poet cannot deny its lack of physical warmth. In this ode however, in a sad but firm tone the poet accepts that the journey of life which begins in close conspiracy with the "maturing sun" is bound to proceed towards the "soft-dying day" when the twittering swallows "will sing its funeral dirge. The apple trees that bend with over-ripened fruits are destined to end in "the stubble – plains with rosy hue". All things that are born will mature, ripen, rot and then die- this is the inviolable law of Nature and TRUTH of LIFE. The culminating line of the poem thus does not end in a paradox but in a statement with a ring of finality.
- The LYRICISM of the ode is enunciated through the lilting rhythm, the preponderance of the soft consonant sounds, assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia.
- The ode is characterized by CLASSICAL RESTRAINT and POISE. The classicism comes out of its neat STRUCTURAL SYMMETRY- the 11 lined cantos are in iambic pentameter with a uniform rhyme scheme. The personification of Autumn in the 2nd canto is very Grecian. The imagery conceived with remarkable poise and precision captures the contrasting opulence and decadence of the transitional season with classical grace. With his trademark ECONOMY of EXPRESSION, Keats encapsulates the beauty of the season in vivid phrases like "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness", "hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind", "barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day".
- The imaginative representation of the season is rendered with a dispassionate OBJECTIVITY that marks the final phase of Keats' artistic maturity.

Prepared by
SANGITA RAY
GOBARDANGA HINDU COLLEGE