

Ode to Autumn

(a poem by John Keats)

Keats is a mystic of the senses and not of thoughts as he sought to apprehend the ultimate truth of the universe through aesthetic sensations and not through philosophical thoughts. Sensuousness is a quality in poetry which affects the senses i.e. hearing, seeing, touching, smelling and tasting. Sensuous poetry does not present ideas and philosophical thoughts. It gives delight to senses, appeals to our eyes by presenting beautiful and colourful word pictures to our ears by its metrical music and musical sounds, to our nose by arousing the sense of smell and so on.

Keats is the worshiper of beauty and peruses beauty everywhere; and it is his senses that first reveal to him the beauty of things. He writes poetry only out of what he feels upon his pulses. Thus, it is his sense impressions that kindled his imagination which makes him realize the great principle that: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'

Keats loves nature for its own sake. He has a straightforward passion for nature by giving his whole soul to the unalloyed enjoyment of its sensuous beauty.

Poetry originates from sense impressions and all poets are more or less sensuous. Sense impressions are the starting point of poetic process. It is what the poet sees and hears that excites his emotions and imagination. The emotional and imaginative reaction to sense impressions generate poetry. The poets give the impressions received by their eyes only. Wordsworth's imagination is stirred by what he sees and hears in nature. Milton is no less sensitive to the beauty of nature, of the flowers in "Paradise Lost" in a sensuous manner. But Keats' poetry appeals to our sense of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch and sense of hot and cold. He exclaims in one of his letters:

O for a life of sensation than of thoughts

He is a pure poet in sense of seeking not sensual but sensuous delight. Keats is a painter of words. In a few words he presents a concrete and solid picture of sensuous beauty.

"Her hair was long, her foot was light
And her eyes were wild."

And in "Ode on Grecian Urn" again the sense of sight is active.

*"O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;"*

The music of nightingale produces pangs of pain in poet's heart.

*"The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days, by emperor and clown:"*

In "Ode on Grecian Urn" he says:

*"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;"*

The opening lines of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" describe extreme cold:

*"The sedge is withered from the lake
And no birds sing."*

In "Ode to Nightingale", Keats describes different kinds of wine and the idea of their tastes in intoxication.

*"O for a beaker full of the warm South
Full of the true the blushful Hippocrene,"*

In "Ode to Nightingale", the poet can't see the flowers in darkness. There is mingled perfume of many flowers.

*"I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet."*

Perhaps the best example of Keats sensuousness is "Ode to Autumn". In this ode the season of autumn is described in sensuous terms in which all senses are called forth.

*"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun;"*

For Keats' Autumn is the season of apples on mossed cottage tree, of fruits which are ripe to the core and of later flowers for bees. Thus autumn to Keats is full of pictures of delights of sense. There is the ripe fruit and ripe grains and also there is music that appeals to the ear.

The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft.

Keats is a poet of sensations. His thought is enclosed in sensuousness. In the epithets he uses are rich in sensuous quality - delicious face, melodious plot, sunburnt mirth, embalmed darkness and anguish moist. Not only are the sense perceptions of Keats are quick and alert but he has the rare gift of communicating these perceptions by concrete and sound imagery. As time passes Keats mind matured and he expresses an intellectual and spiritual passion. He begins to see not only their beauty but also in their truth which makes Keats the "inheritor of unfulfill'd renown".

Keats is more poet of sensuousness than a poet of contemplation. Sometimes he passes from sensuousness to sentiments. In his mature works like Odes or the Hyperion, the poet mixes sensuousness with sentiments, voluptuousness with vitality, aestheticism with intellectualism. However the nucleus of Keats' poetry is sensuousness. It is his senses which revealed him the beauty of things, the beauty of universe from the stars of the sky to the flowers of the wood.

Keats' pictorial senses are not vague or suggestive but made definite with a wealth of artistic detail. Every stanza, every line is replete with sensuous beauty. No other poet except Shakespeare could show such a mastery of language and felicity of sensuousness..

This is a very beautiful poem written by John Keats. He was a poet of the Romantic Movement. In this poem he has written about stages of autumn in three stanzas. These stanzas depict nature truly. The first stanza is about maturation in which the season of autumn matures. In the second stanza there is a reference of sleep which denotes death of autumn and in final stanza we can find music associated with autumn which symbolizes funeral music. Let us analyze this poem deeply. In the first stanza the poet says that-

*“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,*

Until they think warm days will never cease,

For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells."

In the above mentioned lines the poet says that autumn is the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Maturing sun is the bosom friend of autumn and both these friend conspire to load fruits with ripeness. With the overload of apples the branches bend over the moss'd cottage tree. The gourd and the hazel shell swell with sweet kernel. The budding in the flowers are more so that bees are compelled to think that warm days will never cease. The cells are clammy because they have been over brimmed with sweetness of nectar. There is a reference of summer because autumn is extended period of summer and in London autumn is followed by winter. In the next stanza the poet says that-

“Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find

Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,

Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,

Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook

Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep

Steady thy laden head across a brook;

Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,

Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.”

In this stanza personification of autumn has been done by the poet. Autumn is treated like a woman which can be seen by everyone. She is commonly found everywhere. She can be seen in the granary store as well as in the country side sitting carelessly. She acts like a winnower and her hair is softly lifted by the winnowing wind. This line discloses that autumn acts like a woman because ‘thy hair’ symbolizes a woman. There is a reference of sleep and it symbolizes death of the autumn. She is sleeping as if she is under the influence of poppies. In sleep she is reaping and the sickle ‘hook spares the next swath and all its twined flowers’. Sometimes she acts like a gleaner. She is watching the cyder-press patiently unto the last ‘oozings hours by hours’. In the final stanza the poet says that-

“Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

*While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.”*

Through these lines we are made aware that autumn has its own music. This music is the music associated with funeral. This stanza reveals that this music is the music of mourning of small gnats. The loud bleating of lambs and the singing of hedge crickets, the red breast whistling from the garden croft and the twittering of the gathering swallows in sky. All these creatures add music to autumn and thus Keats has proved that not only spring but even autumn has its own music. This poem has been written in form of an ode which can be sung beautifully. This poem has three stanzas and every stanza has eleven lines having a rhyme scheme ABABCDEDCCCE. It is written in Iambic Pentameter and it is interesting to find that all the five senses can be found in this poem. It is one of the reasons that John Keats was also known as a sensuous poet and on his grave it is written that “Here lies one whose name was writ in water” .