

## 11. Hellenism In Keats

- Q. "Ode to a Nightingale by Keats has taught that man passes but beauty is immortal". Discuss. (UOG-2016)
- Q. Write your reaction to the Keats's line "Beauty is truth, Truth Beauty". (UOG-2016)
- Q. 'Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty' says Keats Elucidate. (UOG-2012)
- Q. "Keats's theme in 'Ode On A Grecian Urn' is the belief that the momentary experience of 'beauty' is fleeting, the ideal embodiment of that moment in 'art' is an imperishable source of joy". Substantiate. (UOG-2011)
- Q. Critically analyze "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by Keats. (UOS-2016)
- Q. Bring out the salient features of Hellenism in Keats poetry. (UOS-2014)
- Q. Discuss Hellenism in Keats.

Ans: Keats is essentially a Greek among the English poets. The impact of Greek art is injected into English literature during Renaissance, and from there onward different writers in different ages were influenced by it differently. Greek life and literature, especially Greek mythology has a special fascination for the romantic poets. The reason is that 19<sup>th</sup> century, an age of fast growing science and industrialization, played havoc with the beauties of life which irritated the romantics.

In fact, the romantics do not object to science, but the scientific attitude. Being fed up with this life, they return to Greek mythology which is a symbol of beauty. Therefore, all romantics are inspired by Hellenism differently. For example, Wordsworth's pantheism and didacticism are Greek attributes; Shelly's millennium is Greek concepts, and Byron's "titanic fury" is also a part of Hellenism.

Keats is a Hellenist in special, for he makes Hellenism the very soul and cult of his poetry. As Shelley says that "Keats is a Greek", though he is not Greek by education yet



his poetry gives ample evidences that he is Greek by instinct and temperament. His Hellenism is innate and natural.

Some of his poems are totally based on Greek mythology. For example, the entire texture of "Ode to Psyche", "Ode on Grecian Urn", "Hyperion" and "The Fall of Hyperion" are derived from Greek mythology. In his famous odes, we find a number of references to Greek mythology, for example, in "Ode on Indolence" we find phrases like "figures on a marble urn", "deep in phidian lore", "mask like figures on the dreamy urn" etc. and in "Ode to Nightingale" we find mythological references like "Lethe-ward", "Blushful Hippocrene", "Not charioted by Bacchus" etc.

Keats has three prominent sources which contributes to make him Hellenist.

\* Firstly, he is Greek by instinct. It is bewitching for him.

\* Secondly, he is well read in Greek literature. His thoughts are moulded by Greek thoughts. The stories of 'Endymion', 'Lamia' and 'Hyperion' are based upon Greek Legends. His intellectual horizon was widened by Homeric poetry.

\* Thirdly, he is very much interested in Greek sculpture, especially; he is especially interested in Align marbles. He finds a lot of beauty and symmetry in it. The sight of these marbles not merely causes momentary pleasure but it exercises a very strong influence on his poetic art. His sonnet, 'On seeing the English Marbles' indicates his emotional reaction to the sculptured wonders of Greeks.

But in spite of all this the most important factor in Keats' Hellenism is his inborn temperamental Greekness of his mind. All these things were available to other poets also, but they did not take interest in it, in the manner Keats took in them.

Following certain features of Greekness are found in Keats.

(i) Deification or anthropomorphic quality is a Greek attribute and it is found in abundance in Keats' poetry. The best



example in this regard is "Ode to Autumn". Here he personifies autumn as a thresher, reaper and a gleaner. He says:

**"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".**

He also attributes human qualities and shapes to gods and demi gods.

(ii) **Passion for beauty** is another Greek attribute in Keats. The Greeks were great lovers of beauty and Keats also loves it for its own sake. Beauty is the very soul of his poetry. He also widens the scope of beauty by finding the principles of beauty in everything. To him,

**"A thing of beauty is a joy forever".**

(iii) **Particularly, Keats attitude towards Nature** is Hellenistic. Like Greeks, Keats also enjoys unalloyed pleasure in nature; he does not temper his poetry with philosophy or spiritual message. Similarly, personification of the powers of nature is a peculiar Hellenic quality. Like Greek, Keats peoples woods and glades with Pans and Dryads, and to Keats every tree is associated with Dryad, the moon is Cynthia and the sun is Apollo.

(iv) **Keats is deeply interested in Greek art**, the best example is "Ode on Grecian Urn", this ode reflects the influence of Align marbles, so in this ode, he declares the supremacy of art over nature or life because of its unchanging expressions of perfection, and permanence.

(v) **Greeks were very expert in image making power**, so is the case with Keats. He also possesses the pictorial quality.

(vi) **Greek poetry was mostly fatalistic and tragic**, whereas, Keats' entire poetry is melancholic and full of sufferings.

(vii) **Greeks were much interested in describing colour, ardour and sound**. Keats also describes things as if he touches them, taste them, see them, hear them and even smell them.



(viii) Greeks loved to **escape** in the world of beauty. Keats is also an escapist though he always realizes that escape is impossible in this world.

(ix) Greeks took pleasure in **exotic theories** such as pursuit of gods and goddesses, and same is true with Keats. "Ode to Psyche", "Hyperion", and "Fall of Hyperion" are its best examples to quote.

(x) **Sublimity** of early Greek poetry is also dearly traceable everywhere in Keats' poetry.

All this shows that Keats is primarily a Hellenistic poet. But on the other hand, being an English poet, the **Elizabethan** effect was also natural to him. He widely read Elizabethan writers and they had a marked influence on him following three Elizabethan traits are remarkable in him:

(i) Like Elizabethans and unlike Greeks he loves **fine excesses** in poetry.

(ii) He **lacks restraint and discipline** of the Greeks, being a romantic poet his poetry is free and spontaneous.

(iii) Loveliness of **form** in Greek art makes little appeal to Keats.

So, to this extent **Keats** may be called a Greek. He only sees one side of Greek art, i.e., its beauty, but he does not focus on its self restraint and severe refinement. Keats 'Endymion' and 'Lamia' have Greek themes; these are treated in a pure romantic manner. In respect of his aims and his workmanship, Keats is essentially **a romantic Gothic English**, even in his attitude to his subject and presentation of it; he is far different from the Greeks. In his inner artistic being he is more of an Elizabethan than a Greek. But in Odes, there is a fusion of romantic impulse with classical severity. Here we find Keats' sense of form, purity, and orderliness. The odes show an amazing sense of proportion of classical restraint and spontaneity of romantic poetry.



### Points to remember:

1. Introduction.
2. Keats is essentially Greek.
3. Use of Greek mythology.
4. Hellenism in Keats, three prominent.
5. Some difference from Greek.
6. Elizabethan or Shakespearian elements in Keats.
7. Themes are Greek.
8. Form and style is not Greek.
9. Conclusion.

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