JOHN KEATS:

'ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE'

(BA Hons(English) Semester III Paper II)

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Objectives:
The modest objective of this e content is to:
- develop ICT resources as e content in Romantic Poetry in English literature
- contribute to formal and non formal education of the stakeholders concerned
- facilitate the e learning of the students of B.A. in English
- associate literary studies with behavioral knowledge

Learning Outcome:
After studying this e content, the learners shall
- comprehend the poem ‘Ode to a Nightingale’.
- understand the text, contexts and connotations of the poem.
- make a critical appreciation of the poem ‘Ode to a Nightingale’.
- associate the context of the poem, and develop the power of association and expansion of ideas on the themes and issues concerned.

Subject Mapping /Structure:
1. Text
   1.1. The poem:
   1.2. Glossary
2. Contexts and Interpretation
3. Connotations /Understanding
   3.1. Food For Thought (Appreciation and association)
   3.2. Questions

Subject Content: Dear learners, please find below the discussion of the text, context and connotations of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’.

1. Text
1.1. The poem:
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 thine 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
   Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
   Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt 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 to-morrow.

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,
Cluster'd 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 cover'd 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,
Call'd 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
Charm’d 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 fam’d 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?
1.2 Glossary:

Dear Students, let us find the meaning of difficult words as given below:

1. numbness: lack of sensation in some part of the body
2. hemlock: a poisonous drug made from an Eurasian plant of the genus Conium
3. opiate: a narcotic drug
4. Lethe: a river in Hades
5. Dryad: wood-nymph who is supposed to be presiding deity of the forest in Greek mythology
6. melodious: something having a musical sound; producing a pleasing tune
7. draught: a serving of drink from a large container (a barrel) rather than in a bottle
8. vintage: the oldness of wines
9. delve: to turn up, loosen, or to remove earth
10. mirth: great happiness
11. beaker: a cup (usually without a handle)
12. palsy: a medical condition marked by uncontrollable tremor
13. specter: a ghostly appearing figure
14. lustrous: reflecting light
15. pine: to have a desire for something or someone who is not present
16. verdure: green foliage
17. bough: a larger branch of a tree
18. endow: give qualities or abilities to
19. pastoral: idyllically rural
20. eglantine: Eurasian rose
21. murmurous: characterized by soft sounds
22. darkling: a poetic expression for something occurring in the dark or night
23. ecstasy: a state of elated bliss
24. requiem: a mourning song, a memorial to a dead person
25. fays: fairy
26. save: except
27. sod: surface layer of earth containing a mat of grass and roots
28. immortal: something that has won death
29. winding: zig zag
30. Hawthorn: a thorny shrub
32. casement: a window framework
33. perilous: fraught with danger
34. haply: perhaps
35. poesy: poetry
36. forlorn: marked by hopelessness
37. toll: ring slowly
38. adieu: a statement referring farewell
39. elf: a fairy especially in folklore that is somewhat mischievous
40. plaintive: expressing sorrow
Holograph Copy of John Keats’ Ode to a Nightingale:


Holograph copy of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale".)
2. Contexts:

2.1 Central points:

1. ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is written by romantic poet John Keats.
2. The time of writing is the spring of 1819.
3. Running in 80 lines, it is the longest of Keats's odes
4. The human character in the ode, standing in a dark forest, listens to the beguiling and beautiful song a nightingale.
5. From the common sight he slips into the patterns of ruminations on on time, death, beauty, nature, and human suffering (something the speaker would very much like to escape!).
6. The narrator turns philosophical and offers various scaling of visions and realities, death and immortality, co-existence of pleasure and pain, interdependence of joy and woe etc.
7. The human character rocks on the feelings a propos to the nightingale.
8. Sometimes he finds relief in the nightingale's song. At a moment he believes that poetry will bring the speaker metaphorically closer to the nightingale.
9. In the end of the poem, the human character finds isolation, as the nightingale has flown.
10. He wakes to reality to check whether the whole experience has been "a vision" or a "waking dream."

2.2 Main Themes

i. Death and immortality,
ii. Mortality
iii. Poetic imaginations
iv. Co-existence of pleasure and pain
v. Interdependence of joy and woe
vi. Mortality of life
vii. Escape
viii. Immortality of a song (nightingale is immortal.)
ix. Sensation of passion
x. Endurance of art
xi. Vision vs. reality.
xii. Communication between the world of nature and that of human being

2.3. Features of Style:

1. Symbolism
2. Imagery
3. Illustrations
4. Allusions
5. Rhythmic and structured order
6. Sounding effects
7. Conviction in the ordering of the images

Symbol:
Nightingale - symbol of pure beauty

3.

3.1. Food For Thought: Topics for discussions and debate
Write a project on imagery and symbolism in *Ode to a Nightingale*?(Base your discussion on the following grounds)

- In what ways is the bird’s song different from the products of the human imagination?
- Why are there so many images of death in the poem?
- Considering that a bird has a brief life, why does it become for Keats a symbol of eternal beauty?
- What are the limitations of the beauty which the bird’s song represents?

3.2. Questions:

Read the poem, and find the answers of the following questions:

1. Write a note on the elements of sadness in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’.
2. What is the subject of ‘Ode to the Nightingale’ : Song Bird or Bird Song?
3. Write a note on images in ‘Ode to the Nightingale’.
4. Explain the following :
   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 to-morrow.

5. Explain the following:
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:

Summary: The content titled ‘John Keats’ ‘Ode to the Nightingale’ offers a detailed reading on the text, contexts and connotations of the poem. On the one hand it offers an indicative analysis of the poem, and on the other it suggests the issues of further studies and research in the field concerned.

Frequently Asked Questions

Question-1: Is this matter sufficient for the critical appreciation of the poem?
Answer: Yes, if followed well, it would suffice the purpose.

Videos and Audios:
Dear Students, please open the following links, and see the videos for a better understanding of the text:

John Keats .’Ode to a Nightingale’
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale
John Keats .’Ode to a Nightingale’ May 7, 2018 · Uploaded by ANO SENSEI!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYCjCUoHlV8
John Keats .’Ode to a Nightingale’ The Fitzwilliam Museum Oct 9, 2019
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjYAEa1hxOY
Assignment:
1. Write a critical appreciation of ‘Ode to the Nightingale’ in 250 words

Assessment:

➢ Project: Prepare a list of poetic epithets used in the poem ‘Ode to the Nightingale’

Suggested Readings:

Glossary of terms used in E-content:
Learning outcome: essential learning that learners have achieved and can demonstrate
(Text related glossary is given just below the text)

References

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