

The casual reader of John Keats's poetry would most certainly be impressed by the exquisite and abundant detail of its verse, the perpetual freshness of its phrase and the extraordinarily rich sensory images scattered throughout its lines. But, without a deeper, more intense reading of his poems as mere parts of a larger whole, the reader may miss specific themes and ideals which are not as readily apparent as are the obvious stylistic hallmarks. Through Keats's eyes, the world is a place full of idealistic beauty, both artistic and natural, whose inherent immortality, is to him a constant reminder of that man is irrevocably subject to decay and death. This theme is one which dominates a large portion of his late poetry and is most readily apparent in three of his most famous Odes: To a Nightingale, To Autumn and on a Grecian Urn. In the Ode to a Nightingale, it is the ideal beauty of the Nightingale's song - as permanent as nature itself - in the Ode on a Grecian Urn, it is the perfection of beauty as art - transfixed and transfigured forever in the Grecian Urn - and in the Ode to Autumn it is the exquisiteness of the season - idealised and immortalised as part of the natural cycle - which symbolise eternal and idealistic images of profound beauty.

In Ode to a Nightingale, Keats uses the central symbol of a bird to exemplify the perfect beauty in nature. The nightingale sings to the poet's senses whose ardour for its song makes the bird eternal and thus reminds him of how his own mortality separates him from this beauty. The poem begins: "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains" (Norton 1845). In this first line Keats introduces his own immortality with the aching heart - a machine of flesh with a fixed number of life-giving beats. He also employs a common poetic device to indicate a visionary activity is about to follow with the admission to a state of "drowsy numbness". In this case, the visionary action is the poet slowly lapsing into the nightingale's world, opening his senses to the true nature of the bird while other "men sit and hear each other groan" (Norton 1845). This state of semiconsciousness allows for his understanding that, although it is mid-May, the bird "sings of summer in full-throated ease" (Norton 1845). The nightingale, whose song so perfectly embodies a particular season that the poet is unable to be mistaken about its meaning, expresses the beauty of nature in a way which man is incapable. The poet is also seeing the bird as timeless, for the summer exists within the nightingale regardless of it being mid-May. In stanza seven the poet reveals the nightingale for what it truly is: a symbol nature's immortal beauty. The bird has now entirely escaped the physical limitations of the poet's world where all is subject to death and decay, for it "was not born for death", and is an "immortal bird" living in an imaginary realm. It lives outside of the human world "where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes", yet still affects the poet so profoundly that he wonders if it was "a vision or a waking dream?" (Norton 1847). Keats, in experiencing the song as he describes, idealises the nightingale and elevates the bird to a singular embodiment of unchanging natural beauty.

Instead of looking to nature for idealised beauty in Ode to a Grecian Urn, Keats turns his attention to man-made art for inspiration. It is the moment frozen in time on the side of the urn which constitute the immortality and profound beauty which Keats had earlier discovered in the nightingale. Keats admits to the simple

ease with which the art is able to express its essence in the first stanza when he writes, 'Sylvan historian, who can thus express / a flowery tale more sweetly than the rhyme' (Norton 1847). He is suggesting that art has the power to impress upon the viewer 'more sweetly' than can the written word impress upon the reader. In the second stanza Keats introduces the idea that the unheard song, and by extension that all impression experienced through means other than the physical senses, are more lasting and perfect than those understood through the 'sensual ear', for they are not subject to the imperfections of our gross world: 'heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on.' He goes on to reinforced this idea further in the second stanza when he tells of the 'bold lover' who is frozen, forever anticipating a kiss that will never come, and is thus spared the invariable let down which accompanies all human experience. The lover is forever trapped in a state of *Rythmos* - the climactic moment, an instant before action, which was viewed by the ancient Greeks as the pinnacle of all experience. In this way the lover is a symbol of beautiful perfection, not by the expertise of his depiction but by his perfect exemplification of a single, eternal moment. In this way Keats finds ideal beauty and immortality in art which is unattainable by physical man, who is destined by the laws which give him life, to experience the imperfect as well as the perfect.

It is in Keats's *Ode to Autumn* that the theme of perfect beauty and eternal existence are more clearly conveyed than in any of his other works, for it is to nature itself that he refers for inspiration. The Autumn season is personified and considered a deity as it conspires with the 'maturing sun' to 'load and bless' and to 'set budding more', reliably offering its bounty each successive year. It fills 'all fruit with ripeness to the core' and fills the bees 'clammy cells' with honey till they 're-briem' (Norton 1869). In this first stanza, the perfection of nature's purposes and the way in which Keats indulges in its description leaves little doubt as to what he is trying to convey: that nature itself is the ultimate profound beauty. The very definition of a season implies eternal life for it is bound by the laws of our universe to return each year and perform its duty as it has always done before. Each of the three stanzas dwell upon a different human sense and allude to a different point in the natural cycles of a man's life. The first stanza uses tactile images, such as heavy apples weighing down a branch, which relates to the point in a child's life when he feels and tests his new world by touching and feeling. The second stanza deals predominantly with visual imagery as in the first line when the poet asks, 'who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?' (Norton 1869). This dominance of visual sensation reminds the reader of the time in life when man, full grown, looks forward into the future to see what it has to offer rather than testing through experience as a child might. The third and final stanza is rife with auditory sensations, such as the 'lamb's loud bleat' and the cricket's soft song. The use auditory sensations to describe the passage of autumn into winter reflect the time in a man's life when he becomes complacent and more aware of the preciousness of the moment. It is clear that in *Ode to Autumn* Keats has found the perfect beauty, on which is truly eternal and which emphasises, rather than avoids, the natural cycle of death and decay in the human world.

After reading three of Keats's most famous works in sequence, his obsession with ideal beauty and immortality become apparent. This theme is developed in *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, both in which he strives to find the perfect everlasting beauty in art and nature, but is only confused by the true essence of his subjects; for a bird must die and an urn must crumble and are but symbols of things imagined. Keats however, does discover his elusive eternal beauty in his *Ode to Autumn*, realising that it is mother nature, with her ever recurring seasons and perfection of purpose that is profoundly beautiful. Growing, maturing and dying are no longer avoided in *Ode to autumn*, they are embraced and accepted as necessary for the continuity of the seasons cycle. Keats, through his poetry, is constantly reminding us that the moment, whether short of duration or eternally present, is to be savoured; for all things that exist in man's world are subject to

decay and death because our ability to perceive them is limited. The world is no longer simply a place of song birds, pleasing art and fruit laden trees, but a world of profound and everlasting beauty.