

# Break the Ode Code

LC SHOWS YOU HOW TO IDENTIFY IMAGERY AND WRITE AN ODE WITH HELP FROM MASTER POET **JOHN KEATS**

## Who was John Keats?

John Keats was trained to be a surgeon, but he decided to become a poet instead. He had no formal instruction in poetry, and had never published a poem, but he committed himself to his craft based on his passion. Although Keats died when he was only 26 years old, he produced some of the most important poems of the Romantic period.

Although many Romantic poets praised nature, none described it with as much clarity and tenderness as did Keats. He was a great master of the ode form, and he produced some of its most famous examples, including "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn."

Critics during Keats's lifetime did not recognize his genius. His first book of poems was not well received, and he was attacked as a low-born, vulgar impostor with no right to poetry. Keats was born in 1795 to a middle-class family in Moorfields, England. His father died when Keats was only 9; his mother died when he was 15, leaving him to work and educate himself. By the time of his death in 1821, Keats had produced hundreds of poems, which 20th-century scholars now recognize as some of the greatest examples of Romantic poetry.



## How to Read and Write an Ode

### >>WHAT'S IN AN ODE?

AN ODE IS A POEM WRITTEN IN PRAISE OF A PERSON, A GOD, OR AN OBJECT.

### >>THE OBJECT OF AN ODE IS OFTEN

ADDRESSED DIRECTLY IN THE TITLE OR TEXT.

### >>READ KEATS'S FAMOUS ODE "TO AUTUMN" ALONG WITH THE NOTES.

>>FOLLOW THE PROMPTS TO WRITE YOUR OWN ODE TO A SEASON.

1. Keats's description of the vines and branches conveys the weight of ripe fruit hanging. The verbs "load," "bless," and "bend" communicate both heaviness and abundance.

To Autumn  
by John Keats

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-eaves run;**  
**To bend with apples the mossed 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-brimmed their clammy cells.

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-reaped furrow sound asleep,**  
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spares the next swath and all its twinéd flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
**Or by a cider-press, with patient look,**  
**Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.**

3. In this stanza, Keats personifies autumn as a harvester gathering grain in his fields and taking a nap at midday.

4. Keats invents "oozings" to describe the cider. It has a long, slow vowel sound that underscores its meaning. The phrase "hours by hours" adds to the sense of time passing.

continued →

5. Without using the word "sunset," Keats draws a perfect picture of one by evoking the thin clouds in the sky and the soft, pink light that illuminates the stalks of grain in the field.

Where are the songs of Spring? Aye, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too—

While barréd 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 shallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;

Hedge crickets sing; and now with treble soft

The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;

And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

6. The last stanza describes the music of fall through the accumulation of animal sounds. Keats backs up the wailful choir of gnats with words like bleat, sing, treble, whistles, and twitter.

## WRITE AN ODE IN THE STYLE OF KEATS

JUST FOLLOW THESE SEVEN EASY STEPS AND YOU TOO CAN BE A MASTER.

**1** Choose a season as the subject of your poem. Follow Keats's structure of 3 stanzas of 11 lines each.

**2** Review Note #1. Keats focuses on the changes in the landscape that occur during autumn to make it concrete. Spend your first stanza doing the same.

**3** Look at Note #2. Be sure to use strong, illustrative verbs in your descriptions. Instead of writing "summer is hot," write "in summer, the sun scorches the grass into dry brown stalks."

**4** See Note #3. Personification is a form of metaphor. Can you find an apt metaphor for your chosen season? Explore a metaphor in your second stanza.

**5** Re-read Note #5. Notice how Keats avoids cliché in describing a sunset. Don't rely on descriptions that you have heard from other people to fill in your poem. Visualize what you want to describe and then find your own words to describe what you see.

**6** Note #6 points out verbs that bring the sense of hearing into the poem's imagery. A strong description will address more than one sense. Try to incorporate at least three into your poem.

**7** Your last stanza should describe what happens at the end of the season and how it flows into the next. Then you will have written a lyric ode all your own.