

**Study Material for Degree I (Hons.), English, Paper-II**

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**POEM: ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER**

**POET: JOHN KEATS**

**On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer** is a beautiful poem written by the great romantic poet, John Keats in the year 1816. The poet expresses his feelings and emotions of intense joy and pleasure, wonder and amazement when he gets an opportunity to read the translation of the great Greek Classical poet, Homer's literary work by George Chapman, an Elizabethan dramatist, translator and poet. Chapman has the credit of translating Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*. The literary works of Homer remained like a concealed treasure for the poet as he was ignorant of the Greek language. No doubt, Keats was well aware of the great literary tradition of Greeks but due to his inability to read Greek language restrained the real enjoyment. He was fascinated by the Greek art and culture and loved the concept of beauty in their art. He attained the knowledge of Greek culture through various sources, like its sculpture and Lempriere's Classical Dictionary. The translation of Chapman reveals to him the grandeur of literary talent that Homer possessed. The exuberance and ecstasy that the poet feels after the discovery of this hidden treasure takes the shape of the experience of a traveller. The poet uses the Italian form of Petrarchan sonnet to express the delight and wonder of the experience. The first eight lines form the octave with the rhyme pattern of ABBAABBA and the next six lines that is sestet follow the rhyme pattern of CDCDCD.

*Much have I travell'd in the realm of gold  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.*

In the above lines Keats compares his literary experience to that of a traveller. The image of a traveller perfectly depicts the effects of the wonderful experience and imagination. Like a traveller, Keats is excited and astonished to discover the whole new world of literature. In the first line of the poem '*Much have I travell'd in the realm of gold*' Keats draws a parallel between the experience of a traveller and a poet. The poet claims that he has the pleasure of visiting several countries and kingdoms which are rich and prosperous. In other words, the poet expresses his own experience of wide and extensive reading of literary works. The '*realm of gold*' refers to those rich and majestic literary works that he explores as an admirer of literature. The poet gives a description of those poets of Western Island where poets sing in loyalty to Greek god of poetry and music, Apollo. This also reflects Keats's interest in Greek Literature.

*Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne:  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:*

The quatrain above gives an account of Keats having an idea of some wide kingdom, '*wide expanse*' ruled by '*deep-brow'd Homer*'. The speaker has read extensively but yet was

unable to experience the magical charm of the deep-brow'd Homer's literary world. The term deep-brow'd refers to the unique imaginative power possessed by the great classical poet, Homer. He had heard of the great literary masterpieces, *Illiad* and *Odyssey* written by Homer. Chapman's translation of these splendid literary creations gave opportunity to experience the serenity and purity of the work. The translation done by Chapman unfolds an entirely new world of wonder. The poet uses the metaphor of a traveller to emphasise the curiosity of exploring the unfound land. Chapman's speaking 'loud and bold' is the perfect answer.

The image of discovery and exploration dominates the whole poem. The poet uses two similes of an astronomer and an explorer in the sestet to intensify the excitement of a unique discovery. The discovery of Homer's magnificent kingdom of literary works through Chapman's translations has been emphatic by the use of these similes.

*-Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez-when with eagle eyes*

In the first instance the simile of an astronomer is used. The astronomer gazes at the wide sky patiently and is overwhelmed by the discovery of a new planet that 'swims' into the lens of the telescope. The word 'swim' refers to motion that very aptly captures the experience of discovery.

*He stared at the Pacific, and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise-  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

Another simile is that of stout Cortez who boldly watches with 'eagle eyes' from the summit of Darien to discover the wide Pacific Ocean. This discovery leaves the men struck with awe and wonder.

The poem **On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer** is a perfect example of Petrarchan sonnet. The poem has the unity and coherence of idea regarding discovery. The quatrains and sestet that begin with words like 'Much', 'Oft' and 'Then' give perfection to ideas of exploration and discovery. The octave describes the zeal of discovery whereas the sestet depicts its pleasure.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

- **Poem- On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer**
- **Poet- John Keats(1795-1820)**
- **Notable Works- Eve of St. Agnes, Endymion, Hyperion, Lamia, Ode to Autumn, Ode to Nightingale and many others**
- **Period –Romantic Age**
- **Word Meaning-**
  - i) realm- kingdom
  - ii) bard- poets
  - iii) fealty- loyalty
  - iv) Apollo- Greek God
  - v) expanse- kingdom
- **Sonnet- A poem of fourteen lines.**