

An Introduction To
Ode To A Nightingale

By

John Keats

John Keats (1795-1821)



A Short Biographical Sketch:

The son of a livery-stable keeper, Keats was apprenticed to a surgeon and studied medicine in the London hospitals. When he discovered literature, he read avidly through Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Chapman's translation of Homer. Soon after passing his medical examinations, he gave up medicine and devoted himself to poetry. He was then 21 and in the five years of life that remained to him he produced a body of work that has established him as one of the major English romantic poets.

Of all the romantics Keats at least in his early poetry, attacked the Augustans most straightforwardly, and in *Endymion* (1817) he followed Leigh Hunt's lead in giving narrative speed and variety to the heroic couplet. Later, however, he went to the school of Dryden for the couplets of *Lamia* (1819). Like Shelley, Keats revitalized Greek myth

most fully in the unfinished epic *Hyperion* (1818-19), which makes use of the entire theogony of the ancients. With Shelley and Wordsworth he mastered Miltonic blank verse and of all the romantics drew most extensively upon the Elizabethans. Keats aspired to Shakespearean dramatic objectivity, but he returned in *The Fall of Hyperion* to Spenserian allegory, which he might in time have significantly refashioned. In his six “great odes” Keats developed a new stanza form out of the sonnet and the Spenserian stanza.”

What is an Ode?

An ode is an elaborate lyrical poem with its slow, leisurely movement, expressing the meditative mood of the poet after breaking into poignant feeling. The ode is originated in ancient Greece, where it was sung to the accompaniment of dance and music during religious festivals.

Different Types of Odes:

There are two types of odes- Horatian and Pindaric odes (named after the poets Horace and Pindar). Horatian odes consist of a series of uniform stanzas, while Pindaric odes are highly complex in structure.

Contribution of Keats in the Genre of Odes:

Keats is pre-eminently a poet of odes. He has written a good number of odes, some of which have reached the high-water mark of excellence and have been regarded as the noblest achievements of English verse. His *Ode To A Nightingale*, *Ode On A Grecian Urn*, *Ode to Autumn*, *Ode on Melancholy* are noteworthy.

- Keats freed the ode from its old classical associations of sublimity and grandeur and over-intellectual elements and made it a proper vehicle for a mind which is soaked in the beauty of the earth, indulging in thrilling sensations and passions in human life.
- The odes of Keats are full of rich sensuous beauties of earth; colour, scent and a spirit of brooding quiet and a zest to the enjoyment of the beauties in nature and art.

- Keats' odes are unparalleled for dignity, haunting pathos, magic of suggestion and richness of imagery.

Date and Occasion of Ode To A Nightingale:

The poem was written in the spring of 1819 and was published in the month of July in the same year in an issue of the *Annals of the Fine Arts*.

In the Spring of 1819 Keats was residing at Hampstead under the hospitable roof of his friend, Charles Hermitage Brown. This Spring a nightingale had made its nest near Brown's house. The bird's song often threw Keats into a sort of trance or tranquil pleasure. Brown asserts, "One morning he took the chair from the breakfast table to the grass plot under the plum where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house I received some scraps of paper which he had in his hand. The writing was not legible and it was difficult to arrange the stanzas on so many scraps. With his assistance I succeeded and this was his Ode To A Nightingale."

Brief Summary of Ode To A Nightingale:

Stanza I:

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.

Summary: As the poet listens to the song of the nightingale, in his heart he feels an acute sensation of pain through excess of joy. His senses become numbed. He feels that , like a wood-nymph, the nightingale sits on some tree and sings from there. The bird sings spontaneously to celebrate the charms of summer.

Stanza II:

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:

Summary: The poet yearns to lose himself completely into the song of the bird. He seeks inspiration from wine which has been cooled and stored for a long time under earth. The thought of drinking wine reminds him of the romantic associations of country where the wine originated. He visualizes the picture of a cup full of wine which will redden his lips when he drinks it.

Stanza III:

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.

Summary: The poet expresses his keen desire to run away from the sorrows and sufferings of this world. This bird knows nothing of these woes of human life. Here each man sits and hears the other groan. Old men here get afflicted with palsy, young men

wither away and die prematurely, beauty loses its charm and love loses its warmth too soon.

Stanza IV:

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.

Summary: The poet gives the idea of flying to the bird with the help of wine; he will do so on the invisible wings of poetic imagination, and the next moment, he finds himself with the nightingale. The moon shines in the sky, surrounded by the stars.

Stanza V:

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.

Summary: The poet is in the darkness of the forest by the side of the nightingale. He cannot see what flowers have blossomed around him but he can identify each flower by its smell.

Stanza VI:

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.

Summary: The poet says that he has often been in love with easeful death. It is a luxury to die in the midst of such ecstasy listening to the song of the nightingale. But the bird would not cease singing even after his death.

Stanza VII:

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.

Summary: The bird is not born for death. The voice of the bird is immortal. The voice must have regarded the ears of men and women also in the past. It must have soothed the agonized heart of Ruth and have reached the ears of a captive lady in an enchanted castle.

Stanza VIII:

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?

The word 'forlorn' in the last stanza reminds the poet of his own miseries and desolate state. He comes back to reality. The bird flies away. He hears the notes of the bird gradually fading away from the ears. Doubts if all this was a mere vision.

Different Features of Ode To A Nightingale:

- In Ode To A Nightingale Keats portrays a state of intense aesthetic and imaginative feeling, too poignant for long duration which arises with the song of a bird and vanishes when the song is done.
- Ode To A Nightingale is unsurpassed in the English language for its sheer loveliness, enchanting melody, imaginative conception, intensity of feeling, despondent conception of life, lyrical note of personal passion, felicity of expression, the magic of verbal perfection, noble execution, ravishingly sensuous description, immortal picture-gallery, charming word-painting and grave metrical cadences.
- Ode To a Nightingale has organic unity of thought, cohesion of ideas and a perfect symmetry. The poem consists of eight stanzas and the central idea runs through all these stanzas and ultimately reaches its culmination.
- Ode To A Nightingale turns on the theme of the contrast between the real and the ideal. The whole poem is built on the contrast between the joy, beauty and

apparent permanence of the bird's song and the sorrow and transience of the beauty and joy in human life.

- The poem expresses the mood of despondent contemplation of life. The note of melancholy that runs through the poem is the characteristic note of Romantic poetry.
- The poem exemplifies the romantic qualities of Keats' poetry. The song of the nightingale typifies the very spirit of romance. The song of the nightingale takes the poet from the fret and fever and weariness of earthly life to the romantic world of the nightingale.
- Keats is abundantly sensuous. In this poem, he is steeped in the sensuous enjoyment of the melody of the bird. The joy of the song of the bird has numbed his senses. He enjoys the romantic grove of the bird with all the senses wide awake. He sees the flowers through imagination, he smells their fragrance, he even hears the murmur of the flies round musk rose which is full of dewy wine. Thus from sensations he passes to imagination, but he enjoys the imaginative world with his senses. As the culmination of the sensuous languor, the poet longs for death.

Conclusion: Is Keats an Escapist?

In Ode To A Nightingale, Keats longs for an escape from the cares and anxieties of the present, forget the past memories and to immerse himself in the timeless joy and beauty symbolized by the song of the nightingale. He wants to throw off the burden of self-consciousness, and sink gradually into the dark world of unconsciousness.

But it is not true to say that romantic poets are escapists. Keats escapes from present reality into the higher reality of dreams and yearnings. He desires to escape from actuality as well as from his own consciousness of the past and the present. But finally the poet is called back to self-consciousness. The poem is thus a temporary spell of imaginative excursion into the realm of unconsciousness where the poet's yearnings and longings find poetic release.

Thank You!