

Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats

Ode to a Nightingale Summary

Ode to a Nightingale was written in 1819, and it is the longest one, with 8 stanzas of 10 lines each. It was written at Charles Brown's house, after Keats was struck by the melancholy singing of a nightingale bird, and it travels through the cabal of the Greek gods, all the while emphasizing the feeling of melancholy – a tragic and often very Greek emotion that Keats would have no doubt learned through his readings.

The Writing of "Ode to a Nightingale"

Charles Brown, a friend with whom Keats was living when he composed this poem, wrote,

In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale.

Analysis: "Ode to a Nightingale"

A major concern in "Ode to a Nightingale" is Keats's perception of the conflicted nature of human life, i.e., the interconnection or mixture of pain/joy, intensity of feeling/numbness or lack of feeling, life/death, mortal/immortal, the actual/the ideal, and separation/connection.

In this ode, Keats focuses on immediate, concrete sensations and emotions, from which the reader can draw a conclusion or abstraction. Does the experience which Keats describes change the dreamer? As reader, you must follow the

dreamer's development or his lack of development from his initial response to the nightingale to his final statement about the experience.

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-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singing of summer in full-throated ease.

Stanza I.

The poet falls into a reverie while listening to an actual nightingale sing. He feels joy *and* pain, an ambivalent response. As you read, pick out which words express his pleasure and which ones express his pain and which words express his intense feeling and which his numbed feeling. Consider whether pleasure can be so intense that, [paradoxically](#), it either numbs us or causes pain.

What qualities does the poet ascribe to the nightingale? In the beginning the bird is presented as a real bird, but as the poem progresses, the bird becomes a [symbol](#). As you read the poem, think about what the bird comes to symbolize. The bird may symbolize more than one thing. Possible meanings include

- pure or unmixed joy,
- the artist, with the bird's voice being self expression or the song being poetry,
- the music (beauties) of nature
- the ideal.

Think of the quality or qualities attributed to the nightingale in deciding on the bird's symbolic meaning.

O for a draught of vintage! t

hat hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd 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-stainèd mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Stanza II.

Wanting to escape from the pain of a joy-pain reality, the poet begins to move into a world of imagination or fantasy. He calls for wine. His purpose is clearly not to get drunk. Rather he associates wine with some quality or state he is seeking. Think about the effects alcohol has; which one or ones is the poet seeking? Since his goal is to join the bird, what quality or qualities of the bird does he want to experience? How might alcohol enable him to achieve that desire?

The description of drinking and of the world associated with wine is idealized. What is the effect of the images associating the wine with summer, country pleasure, and romantic Provence? The word "vintage" refers to a fine or prime wine; why does he use this word? (Would the effect differ if the poet-dreamer imagined drinking a rotgut wine?) Why does Keats describe the country as "green"? Would the effect be different if the countryside were brown or yellowed? The activities in line 4 follow one another naturally: dance is associated with song; together they produce pleasure ("mirth"), which is sunburnt because the country dances are held outdoors. "Sunburnt mirth" is an excellent example of [synaesthesia](#) in Keats' imagery, since Flora, the green countryside, etc. are being experienced by Keats through drinking wine in his imagination.

The image of the "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" is much admired. Does it capture the action of sparkling wine? What sounds are repeated? What is the

effect of this [alliteration](#)? Do any of the sounds duplicate the bubbles breaking? Say the words and notice the action of your lips.

This image of the bubbles is concrete; in contrast, the preceding imagery in the stanza is [abstract](#). Can you see the difference?

Does the wine resemble the nightingale in being associated with summer, song, and happiness?

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 grey 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.

Stanza III.

His awareness of the real world pulls him back from the imagined world of drink-joy. Does he still perceive the real world as a world of joy-pain? Does thinking of the human condition intensify, diminish, or have no effect on the poet's desire to escape the world?

The poet uses the word "fade" in the last line of stanza II and in the first line of this stanza to tie the stanzas together and to move easily into his next thought. What is the effect of the words "fade" and "dissolve"? why "far away"?

What is the relationship of the bird to the world the poet describes? See line 2. Characterize the real world which the poet describes. By implication, what kind of world does the nightingale live in? (Is it the same as or different from the poet's?)

Lead is a heavy metal; why is despair "leaden-eyed" (line 8)?

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.

Stanza IV.

The poet suddenly cries out "Away! away! for I will fly to thee." He turns to fantasy again; he rejects wine in line 2, and in line 3 he announces he is going to use "the viewless wings of Poesy" to join a fantasy bird. In choosing Poesy, is he calling on analytical or scientific reasoning, on poetry and imagination, on passion, on sensuality, or on some something else?

He contrasts this mode of experience (poetry) to the "dull brain" that "perplexes and retards" (line 4); what way of approaching life does this line reject? What kinds of activities is the brain often associated with, in contrast to the heart, which is associated with emotion?

In line 5, he succeeds or seems to succeed in joining the bird. The imagined world described in the rest of the stanza is dark; what qualities are associated with this darkness, e.g., is it frightening, safe, attractive, empty, fulfilling, sensuous, alive?

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmèd 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.

Stanza V.

Because the poet cannot see in the darkness, he must rely on his other senses. What senses does he rely on? Are his experience and his sensations intense? for himself only or for the reader also?

Even in this refuge, death is present; what words hint of death? Do these hints help to prepare for stanza VI? Was death anticipated in stanza I by the vague suggestions in the words "Lethe," "hemlock," "drowsy numbness," "poisonous," and "shadowy darkness"?

The season is spring (the musk rose, which is a mid-May flower, has not yet bloomed). Nevertheless, Keats speaks of summer: in stanza one he introduces the nightingale singing "of summer," and in this stanza he refers to the murmur of flies "on summer eves." In the progression of the seasons, what changes occur between spring and summer? how do they differ (as, for instance, autumn brings fulfillment, harvest, and the beginning of decay which becomes death in winter)? Why might Keats leap to thoughts of the summer to come?

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 musèd 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.

Stanza VI.

In Stanza VI, the poet begins to distance himself from the nightingale, which he joined in imagination in stanzas IV and V.

Keats yearns to die, a state which he imagines as only joyful, as pain-free, and to merge with the bird's song. The nightingale is characterized as wholly blissful-- "full-throated ease" in stanza I and "pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!" (lines 7-8).

The mixed nature of reality and its transience are suggested by the contrasting phrases "fast-fading violets" and "the coming musk-rose."

In the last two lines, the poet no longer identifies with the bird. He realizes what death means for him; death is not release from pain; rather it means non-existence, the inability to feel the bird's ecstasy. Is there any suggestion of the bird's dying or experiencing anything but bliss? Note the contrast between the bird's singing and the poet's hearing that song; what are the emotional effects of or associations with "high requiem" and "sod"? Why does Keats now hear the bird's song as a requiem? (He heard the bird's song very differently earlier in the poem.) Might the word "still" have more than one meaning here?

Is there any irony in Keats's using the same word to describe both the nightingale and death--the bird sings with "full-throated ease" at the end of stanza I and death is "easeful" (line 2 of this stanza)?

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 ofttimes hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam

Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell

Stanza VII.

Keats moves from his awareness of his own mortality in the preceding stanza to the perception of the bird's immortality. On a literal level, his perception is wrong; this bird will die. Some readers, including very perceptive ones, see his characterization of the bird as immortal as a flaw. Before you make this judgment, consider alternate interpretations. Interpreting the line literally may be a misreading, because the bird has clearly become a symbol for the poet.

- Is he saying that the bird he is now hearing is immortal? or is he saying something else, like "the bird is a symbol of the continuity of nature" or like "the bird represents the continuing presence of joy in life"? In such a reading, the poet contrasts the bird's immortality (and continuing joyful song) with the condition of human beings, "hungry generations."
- Does the bird symbolize ideal beauty, which is immortal? Or is the bird the visionary or imaginative realm which inspires poets? Or does the bird's song symbolize poetry and has the passion of the song/poem carried the listening poet away?
- Has the actual bird been transformed into a myth?
- Does this one bird represent the species, which by continuing generation after generation does achieve a kind of immortality as a species?
- Is the nightingale not born for death in the sense that, unlike us human beings, it doesn't know it's going to die? An implication of this reading is that the bird is integrated into nature or is part of natural processes whereas we are separated from nature. The resulting ability to observe nature gives us the ability to appreciate the beauty of nature, however transitory it--and we--may be.

The poet contrasts the bird's singing and immunity from death and suffering with human beings, "hungry generations." What is he saying about the human experience with "hungry"? If you think in terms of the passage of time, what is the effect of "generations"?

The stanza begins in the poet's present (note the present tense verbs *tread* and *hear* in lines 2 and 3). Keats then makes three references to the bird's singing in the past; the first reference to emperor and clown is general and presumably in a historical past; the other two are specific, one from the Old Testament, the other from fairy tales. The past becomes more remote, ending with

a non-human past and place ("faery lands"), in which no human being is present. Is Keats trying to limit the meaning of the bird's song with these images or to extend its meaning? What ideas or aspects of human life do these references represent?

The mixed nature of reality manifests itself in his imagining the nightingale's joyous song being heard by in the past in the series of three images. Is the reference to the emperor and clown positive or neutral? The story of Ruth is unhappy (what words indicate her pain?). In the third image, the "charm'd magic casements" of fairy are "forlorn" and the seas are "perilous." "Forlorn" and "perilous" would not ordinarily be associated with magic/enchantment. These words hint at the pain the poet recognized in the beginning of the poem and is trying to escape. Does bringing up the idea of pain prepare us or help to prepare us for the final stanza?

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fabled 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?

Stanza VIII.

The poet repeats the word "forlorn" from the end of stanza VII; who or what is now forlorn? Is the poet identified with or separate from the nightingale?

In lines 2 and 3, the poet says that "fancy" (imagination) has cheated him, as has the "elf" (bird). What allusion in the preceding stanza does the word "elf" suggest? What delusion is the poet awakening from?

The bird has ceased to be a symbol and is again the actual bird the poet heard in stanza I. The poet, like the nightingale, has returned to the real world. The bird flies away to another spot to sing. The bird's song becomes a "plaintive anthem" and fainter. Is the change in the bird, in the poet, or in both? Is Keats's description of the bird's voice as "buried deep" a reference only to its physical distance, or

does the phrase have an additional meaning? It is the last of the death images running through the poem.

With the last two lines, the poet wonders whether he has had a true insight or experience (vision) or whether he has been daydreaming. Is he questioning the validity of the experience the poem describes, or is he expressing the inability to maintain an intense, true vision? Of course, the imaginative experience is by its nature transient or brief. Is his experience a false vision, or is it a true, if transitory experience of and insight into the nature of reality?

Has the dreamer in this poem changed as a result of his visionary experience? For instance, has his life been improved in any way? has he been damaged in any way? (The effect of the dream on the dreamer is a thread that runs through Keats's poems. The life of the dreamer in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" has been destroyed, and there is a question about the impact of dreaming on Madeline in "The Eve of St. Agnes.") What does the [tone](#) of the ending seem to you, e.g., happy, excited, hopeful, depressed, sad, despairing, resigned, accepting?

Does Keats, in this ode, follow the pattern of the [romantic ode](#)?

The poem itself is very unhappy; Keats is stunned at the happiness of the bird, and despairs at the difference between it and its happiness and his own unhappy life. At the start of *Ode to a Nightingale*, the heavy sense of melancholy draws allusions to *Ode to Melancholy*, and Keats – despite the death [imagery](#) – does not really want to die. The conflicted nature of human life – mixture of pain/joy, emotion/numbness, the actual/the ideal, etc – dominates the poem, so much so that, even at the end, it is unclear whether or not it happened – ‘do I wake or dream?’ It can also be assumed that the heavy imagery of death and sickness could hark back to his experiences taking care of his elder brother, who died of tuberculosis underneath John Keats’ care. The unhappiness, however, that Keats feels in the poem is not necessarily miserable – Keats writes that he has been ‘half in love with easeful Death’, and describes the joy of listening to the nightingale’s song in a sort of euphoria. It can therefore be considered that Keats would rather forget his unhappiness, than die: the references to hemlock, and Lethe, solidify this [argument](#), as both would blur the memory enough to allow Keats to forget. There are heavy allusions to mythology: Lethe, the river of forgetting that flows through the underworld; Hippocrene, the fountain of the Muses made by Pegasus’ hooves which brings inspiration; dryads, the spirit protectors of the forest; Bacchus, god of wine and debauchery; Ruth and the corn-field is a reference to the

book in the Bible; hemlock, the poison that killed Socrates; Flora, the Roman goddess of nature.

Nature and imagination are shown to be a brief reprieve from human suffering, hence the song of the nightingale, and its impressions. There is also a shift from reality to idealism: Keats says that he would like to drink from 'a draught of fine vintage' (a very fine wine) and transport himself to the ideal world that the nightingale belongs to. He states that he will not be taken there by Bacchus and his pards (Bacchanalia, revelry and chaos) but by poetry and art. Keats then goes on to describe his ideal world, making reference to the 'Queen Moon' and all her 'starry-eyed Fay' – however, Keats cannot actually transport himself into this world, and the end of the nightingale's song brings about the end of his fantasy. 'Country green', 'Provençal song' and 'sunburned mirth' all point to a highly fantastical reality, especially considering the status of the world at the time, and the mythological references help to maintain a [surreal](#), dreamlike state throughout the entire poem and to charge Keats' fantasies with identifiable ideas and figures. Keats uses the senses heavily in all his poetry, relying on synaesthetic description to draw the reader into *Ode to a Nightingale*. It works especially well here because Keats' fantasy world is dark and sensuous, and he 'cannot see what flowers are at my feet'; he is 'in embalmed darkness'. The darkness may have helped his imagination to flourish and furnish his ideal creation, as well as lending a supernatural air to *Ode to a Nightingale*.

The drowsiness comes from the longing to flee the world and join the nightingale – to become like the nightingale, beautiful and immortal and organic – and after rejecting joining the nightingale through Bacchanalian activity, he decides that he will attempt to join the bird through poetry. Thus, the rapture of poetic inspiration matches the rapture of the nightingale's music and thereby links nature to poetry to art (nature as art and beauty, a Romantic ideal). He calls the bird 'immortal', thereby also stating that nature will survive man.

The bird's song translates inspiration into something that the outside world can understand; like art, the nightingale's singing is changeable and renewable, and it is music that is 'organic', not made with a machine. It is art, but art that cannot be viewed and has no physical form. As night shifts into day – shifting from supernatural back into fact – the bird goes from being a bird to a [symbol](#) of art, happiness, freedom and joy, back to being a bird. It is contrasted, in the third stanza, by the reality of the world around him – sickness, ill-health and conflict. The first half of *Ode to a Nightingale* represent the way man was – the pleasurable moments of life that overwhelm and leave a gap behind when they're over; the

second half is maturity, understanding truth, which leads to pleasure but also leads to pain.

At the end, Keats realizes that merging with the 'embalmed darkness' means dying, giving himself up completely to death and becoming one of the world that he admires, however it would mean that he can no longer hear the nightingale and would be farther away from beauty. Neither life nor death is acceptable to Keats. He belongs nowhere.

Historical Background

In 1819, Keats left his [paid position as a dresser at the hospital](#) to devote himself to a career in poetry, and it was during the spring that he wrote the five major odes, before delving into a variety of other forms of poetry. More on John Keats can be found [here](#).

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english>

<https://poemanalysis.com/john-keats/ode-to-a-nightingale/>

