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John Keats' Ode: Analyzing the poem Ode to a Nightingale

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetically, Keats's Ode to a Nightingale is one of his best envisaged and most cheering and as such most talked over poems. With the prime theme of the contrast between the permanence of nature and the impermanence of human life and that of the unpredictable nature of creative imagination, the poem received an extensive critical contemplation. The intramural and morphological mechanisms of the motion of the intellection and the figures of speech by which those themes and contrasts expose themselves are introduced in a very regulated but indicative manner in the poem. This paper approaches largely from a fresh point of view, to those mechanisms in order to show the poem's inherent unification under its outward anxiety, irony, uncertainty and skepticism, which are indeed part of its aesthetic notion in light of Keats's own poetic and aesthetic ideas.

The poem was written in April 1819, when Keats was staying with his friend Charles Brown at Wentworth Place in Hampstead, London. A Nightingale had built its nest, near the house. Keats felt a tranquil joy in the bird's song. The ode is thus inspired by the Nightingale and is a spontaneous expression of the poet's unbounded joy in the song of the Nightingale.

In part, the 'Ode to a Nightingale' is a very triumphant song to death; in part, it is a song of despair as the song of the bird, in part an invitation to the supreme ecstasy of death. In part, the voice of immortality is sounding clearly amid the agony of mortality.

Keats, listening to Nightingale's song, is oppressed by its beauty and joy. He longs to escape to the world of the forest by the aid of a cup of wine. He longs to escape far from the madding crowd, the fever and fret, the cares and sorrows of daily life. Poetry shall bear him away, he finds himself transported to the woodland world. He finds the beauty of the early summer. The intolerable power of beauty makes him long for death. With his own mortality, he contrasts the immortality of the bird. With the word 'forlorn', the closing stanza calls up a train of associations, which woke him up from his dream; he cannot escape as he had pretended. The song of the nightingale fades away in the distance and the poet returns, half dozed to real life.

The Ode to a Nightingale is the most passionately humane and personal of all the great odes. It was written soon after the tragic death of his beloved brother Tom. The poet was already in the clutches of that terrible disease, he was also feeling keenly pangs of his intense, but hopeless passions for Fenny Browne, and his financial difficulties were aggravated by the brutal attacks on his poetry. Hence, an undercurrent of melancholy runs through the ode. The following lines are manifestly autobiographical:

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;

The poem vibrates with personal anguish but as Middleton Marry tells us it is not a poem of despair, "its marble is that, it holds suspended, in a moment of absolute beauty, the tension between mortality and immortality between life and death."

The poem is a lovely piece of romantic poetry. The atmosphere is a hushed silence at midnight and the poet listening in the dark corner of the garden to the thrilling voices of the bird, which makes one suddenly aware of the sorrow of human conditions and beauty that passes the mysterious almost supernatural, ethereal atmosphere of the poem prove the poet as characteristically romantic. The poet like a wonderer, in quest of happiness, escapes from reality to encounter reality again at the end of the poem. He comes back from where he started with a question, though sadder but wiser.

The poem has special interest as the most richly representative of all Keats's poems. There is its matchless evocation of that spring and early summer season which constitutes a large part of Keatsian world and there is its exceptional degree of distillation of concentrated recollection, that is to say of images and turns of expression, sensation, sentiments, ideas and moods.

The ode is an epitome of all the characteristic qualities of Keats's poetry. It is richly sensuous. In the opening stanza, the poet enjoys the sensation of absolute lethargy, the total relaxation of the mood and the body. In the second stanza, he enjoys the sensation of coolness, followed by a multicolored picture which is richly suggestive:

Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,

And purple-stained mouth;

The following lines also bring out Keats's sensuousness:

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 ticket, 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.

Keats's poetry, for being victorial here, beautiful word pictures follow each other succession. Like: "And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;"; "And leaden-eyed despairs"; "And purple-stained mouth."

The poet explains the Greek myths by references to "light-winged Dyrad", "flora", "blushful Hippocrene", "Bacchus", "pards" etc.

The diction is sweet and sonorous. The stanza form used in the poem is a beautiful invention with its intricate rhyme scheme. It is often lined with the rhyme scheme 'abab cde cde'. All the lines except one are of 10 syllables and they measure iambic meter. The eighth line is short, consisting of 6 syllables and the last line of the second stanza is an Alexandrine or twelve syllable line. On account of the qualities and characteristics mentioned above, Sidney Calpin regards it as one of the glories in English poetry and it is undoubtedly a masterpiece.

The poem includes a wide variety of the poet's unspoken motives in terms of stylistic devices. Moreover, rhetorical elements, prolific sensuous imagery, diverse phonological features, romantic attention as well as the whole poetic construction turn this poem into an artistic work worthy of analysis. Having considered the above mentioned points, I am going to analyze both the spoken and unspoken characteristics of the poem. Additionally, the poem is a decent amalgamation of both emotive and syntactic features; therefore, a stylistic method will be applied in order to explore the poem. "Ode to a Nightingale" describes a series of conflicts between reality and the Romantic ideal of uniting with nature. In the words of Richard Fogle, "The principal stress of the poem is a struggle between ideal and actual: inclusive terms which, however, contain more particular antitheses of pleasure and pain, of imagination and common sense reason, of fullness and privation, of permanence and change, of nature and the human, of art and life, freedom and bondage, waking and dream." Nonetheless, Albert Guerard, Jr argues that the poem contains a "longing not for art but a free reverie of any kind. The form of the poem is that of progression by association, so that the movement of feeling is at the mercy of words evoked by chance, such words as *fade* and *forlorn*, the very words that, like a bell, toll the dreamer back to his sole self." However, Fogle points out that the terms Guerard emphasizes are "associational translations" and that Guerard misunderstands Keats's aesthetic. After all, the acceptance of the loss of pleasure by the end of the poem is an acceptance of life and, in turn, of death. Death was a constant theme that permeated aspects of Keats poetry because he was exposed to death of his family members throughout his life. Within the poem, there are many images of death. The nightingale experiences a sort of death and even the god Apollo experiences death, but his death reveals his own divine state. As Perkins explains, "but of course, the nightingale is not thought to be literally dying, the point is that the deity or the nightingale can sing without dying. But, as the ode makes clear, man cannot—or at least not in a visionary way." With this theme of a loss of pleasure and inevitable death, the poem, according to Claude Finney describes "the inadequacy of the romantic escape from the world of reality to the world of ideal beauty". Earl Wasserman essentially agrees with Finney, but he extended his summation of the poem to incorporate the themes of Keats's *Mansion of Many Apartments* when he says, "the core of the poem is the search for the mystery, the unsuccessful quest for light within its darkness" and this "leads only to an increasing darkness, or a growing recognition of how impenetrable the mystery is to mortals." With these views in mind, the poem recalls Keats's earlier view of pleasure and an optimistic view of poetry found within his earlier poems, especially *Sleep and Poetry*, and rejects them. Additionally, F. R. Leavis wrote, "One remembers the poem both as recording, and as being for the reader, an indulgence." Following Leavis, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in a 1938 essay, saw the poem as "a very rich poem. It contains some complications which we must not gloss over if we are to appreciate the depth and significance of the issues engaged." Brooks would later argue in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) that the poem was thematically unified while contradicting many of the negative criticisms lodged against the poem.

It is interesting to note that the Keatsian conflicts between idealism and skepticism are similar to the Yeatsian ones in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Wild Swans at Coole." Yeats also wishes to escape from the actualities of the biological world of process, birth, decay, and death into the permanent world of art where he would assume the shape of a golden bird. But it is obvious that he would then become a mere cold artifact free from the pulsating, throbbing process, though still looking from a distance and singing of the flux of the world of the living. After Keats and before Yeats, the famous Danish writer of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen, showed the difference between the beauty of the natural and the precision of cold science in his short story *The Nightingale*. Like Keats's nightingale, the fullness of life of Yeats's "wild swans" makes him aware of his growing old age and with it possible poetic decline. The symbolization of the faculty of imagination by the abundance of life embodied in the swans implies that their disappearance from the sight of the poet is going to signal a loss of his creative powers just like the nightingale's fading away signals the break of Keats's spell of imagination. Keats's nightingale is the "objective correlative" for his emotions and feelings. As Eliot defines the term, the object of nature acts as a medium through which the poet attempts to objectify his subjective impressions about the process of life fraught with tragic consequences. Of the "three voices of poetry," identified by Eliot in the essay by the same title as the meditative, the dramatic, and the didactic, Keats's poem combines the first two with the total exclusion of the last. The meditative content, however, gives in to the dramatic in the form of a symbolic debate as the poem progresses through a process of "advance and withdrawal," giving an impression of a living speech and a need for discourse. There is a sense of rhetorical urgency and intimacy in the form of lyric "I-You" address. The "I" of the poem is a poetic persona, a poetic mask, not the poet's own self, which is thus not directly involved in the debate between the listener and the object of his listening. Keats's nightingale is an aesthetically perceived object in much the same way as Robert Frost's tuft of flowers in the poem by the same title. Unlike Keats, Frost, however, never leaves the earth, always letting his practical sense of reality prevail over the romantic tendency to give in to fancy. Although Frost is a romantic in his characteristic ways, he does not yield to the temptation of the music of the thrush (as in "Come In") nor does he linger to contemplate the sensuously inviting landscape nearby (as in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"), preferring to attend to the distant obligations and responsibilities. While Keats discovers the limitations of his imaginative quest after having plunged into imaginative contemplation and ultimately becomes better equipped to confront both the real and the ideal with a far-reaching vision, Frost seems to be armed with a foreknowledge of the dangers of imaginative dallying and therefore is refrained from full participation in the romantic flight. The result is a characteristic Frostian earthy didacticism whose literary quality lies in its irony, ambiguity, and paradox--something that Frost shares with Keats. Keats's aesthetic and sensuous passion for the beauty of nature precludes any moralism and didacticism. After having pointed out his passion for what he (Keats) described as "the mighty *abstract idea* of Beauty in all things," Matthew Arnold rightly observes that "in one of the two great modes by which poetry interprets, in the faculty of naturalistic interpretation, in what we call natural magic, [Keats] ranks with Shakespeare." Despite his indebtedness to the literary tradition of the past, Keats establishes an Emersonian "original relation" with nature, independent of his knowledge of history and human society, just as he creates his own stanza-form out of the tradition of two sonnet forms. As Emerson (ed. 1968, 357) says, "Nature will not be Buddhist; she resents generalizing, and insults the philosopher in

every moment with a million of fresh particulars." Keats experiences many emotions in contact with "fresh particulars" of nature in the form of its sights and sounds. He belongs to that school of Idealist Aestheticians who hold that spiritual element is introduced to the phenomena of nature not by God but by man's own consciousness. Beauty, in their view, is merely a particular condition of the human mind. And Keats as a poet shows a remarkable acumen for such conditions in which he captures the beauty and variety of natural sights and sounds with a sense of the immediate as well as the primitive in aesthetically satisfying form and style.

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