

‘Ode to a Nightingale’ by John Keats

By A. Afsheen Sardar

Ode to a Nightingale is a lyric poem. It is believed that ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ was composed in the spring of 1819 when Keats was visiting a dear friend Charles Brown. A nightingale had built a nest near the house and Keats was simply mesmerized by its melodious voice. 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. It was then Keats wrote this poem in appreciation of the Nightingale’s melodious voice and touched upon a lot of deep humanistic values through this lyrical poem.

Analysis of ‘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 of feeling, life/death, mortal/immortal, the actual/the ideal, and separation/connection. In this ode, Keats focuses on immediate, real sensations and emotions. The reader must wear the shoes of the dreamer if he wants to submerge into the deeper meaning of the poem. Keats’s ultimate wish in this poem is to join the Nightingale. From the first verse we learn that the nightingale sings "in some melodious plot / Of beechen green" (8-9), not in a plum-tree. The time is "night" or "midnight" (35, 56), not a morning after breakfast. The season is summer (10, 50), not spring. Listening to the bird makes the poet’s heart ache with a sense of joy and complete peace. He is overwhelmed by its ageless music.

Keats experiences the beautiful sensation of the song after Keats suspends into another reality:

"Ode to a Nightingale" opens when Keats acknowledges the feeling of "a drowsy numbness" that he associates with having taken drugs like hemlock or opium, or with drinking from the classical river, Lethe, which makes humanity forget what it was like to have lived. Keats then wishes to drink deeply of red wine so that he could "fade away" (20-21), leaving the suffering world for the nightingale's joyful song. What transports him, however, is the imagination. Despite the physical brain, which "perplexes and retards" (34), his mind enables him to "fly" up to the nightingale in the trees. He imagines the moon's bright light blown through "winding mossy ways" (40) but arrives in utter darkness, lacking sight and smell. He imagines himself desiring death, "Now more than ever seems it rich to die" (55), and experiencing it, becoming "a sod" (60). Imagination ends the experience it initiated. At the word "forlorn," Keats comes "back" to his "sole self," that is, the self left alone by its flying double. He becomes conscious of what he has experienced as, perhaps, "a waking dream" (79).

The bell curve of the Ode signifies Keats taking flight with the bird and towards the end of the Ode his heart flies down as he realizes it is time to say good-bye to the bird. Keats is actually visualizing himself flying with the bird, lost in its melodious voice. A typical OBE (Out of Body Experience) begins when sensory input is disrupted, sometimes by drugs. The mind then feels itself float upwards out of the body to a height that has been termed "bird's-eye" or tree-high. Often the ascent may seem like traveling through a tunnel towards a bright light. Experiencing itself being divided into two, or having a dissociated double, the self may feel itself near death. Afterwards, when the mind returns to the body, the person recalls his experience, not as a dream during REM (rapid-eye-movement) sleep, but as vivid or wide-awake dreaming. In the last verse Keats is so completely lost in the bird's song that he can't really recall whether it was a vision or a waking dream or had he actually experienced the bird's singing.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?

In order to understand the complete beauty of the song it is important to know that it will not last forever and that is what makes it even more beautiful and perhaps sorrowful. In the first verse Keats expresses that he is too happy in the bird's song and is not envious of its melodious voice. The bird's capability to bring peace and happiness to the listener is an important quality; life should not be led in a selfish manner. The essence of ultimate happiness is to make others happy.

Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" springs from a poet's personal life-changing, mind-wrenching experience of a timeless paradise, a world where there is no suffering. Keats wants to enjoy this timeless capsule 'on the viewless wings of Poesy' (33) using all his craft's resources, but with little sensory recall. The "tender" night (35) and "embalmed darkness" (43) disable his sight and leave him guessing at fragrances. Simple words like "song," "voice," "anthem," and "music" only hint at the nightingale's soul-pouring "ecstasy". The bird's song makes the listener reflect on human suffering. In a world which is full of plague and misery, the Nightingale works her magic of soothing the nerves by producing magnificent music. Keats talks about suffering before death. Death claims youth, yet man can't do anything to prevent this suffering. During his training as a medical practitioner, Keats saw drugs like opium (3) and wine (11) deaden the pain of feverishly ill men, the aged shaking from palsy, and the consumptive young (23-26). His own brother Tom, dying of consumption at this time, lingers on in "*Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies*" (26). Keats ultimate goal is to join the bird and enter a world of continuous peace and ecstasy.

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Nightingale through Keats's eyes:

Keats associates the Nightingale's melodious voice with ecstasy drugs, which allow the human body to experience the ultimate highs in life. Keats views the bird as one which dwells in the beech tree, a bird which sings of summer in an easy, elegant manner. Listening to the bird is like drinking a draught of vintage. By drinking this potion Keats believes he can disappear into nothingness just like the beautiful effect of the bird's song. In line 41 Keats' praise of the Nightingale is infinite. He explains that he is unable to notice any other sight of beauty, as his complete attention and devotion is for the nightingale and her beautiful song. In the following stanza Keats wishes death so he is able to join the nightingale. Keats believes that a thing of beauty is a joy forever. He tells the bird that the bird is immortal; the joy her singing brings will never die. As the Nightingale flies farther away from the poet, Keats pays his final compliment and wishes the bird good-bye. He says that saying good bye to the bird's singing is like being woken up from a beautiful dream. As the bird flies over the meadows the immortal beauty of the song can be enjoyed by many. Keats, in his last lines, says he doesn't know whether he really experienced the magical singing of the Nightingale or if it was a dream.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

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Floral imagery:

In the 5th verse Keats has beautifully described the beauty of the Nightingale's voice by comparing it to the beautiful flora which was all around Keats while he enjoyed the bird's song. Keats is unable to see the beautiful flowers as the lush green trees do not allow any moon light to fall upon the flora. Keats welcomes this, as he completely wants to lose himself in the beautiful song and does not want any distractions. Keats can enjoy the sweet fragrance of the violets and the musky rose which is in full bloom. Keats uses the word *Embalmed* to describe the preserved beauty of the flowers and the thicket. The surroundings make the song of the Nightingale ever more beautiful.

Mythical beings:

Keats refers to the river **Lethe**: a river of the Underworld from which the shades drank, and thus obtained forgetfulness of the past. This is how Keats feels when he hears the Nightingale chant.

He calls the bird a light winged **Dryad** of the trees. A dryad is a wood nymph.

Flora is the goddess of flowers, but here it is used for all kinds of flowers.

Bacchus and his Pards: the Roman god of wine, who traditionally is shown in a conveyance drawn by leopards. Keats in the fourth verse says that he will fly and join the bird not charioted by Bacchus but on the sweet invisible wings of the Poesy.

Fays: fairies.

Elf: fairy creatures. Keats pays a compliment to the nightingale by saying that her beautiful voice can leave anyone in a trance even the elves, who are known for their sharp senses.

Linguistic Devices used in the Ode:

Rhyme: The rhyme of each stanza is ababcdecde.

Alliteration: Few examples of alliteration can be seen in the Ode. *Singest of summer* where the S sound gives a feeling of softness and elation associated with the time of summer. *Self same song* is another example. Alliteration adds to the beauty of the Ode; it adds a smooth flow to the verses.

Synaesthetic Image:

In the second verse Keats uses the words *tasting of flora*. One can't imagine tasting flora, but smelling it. Here Keats has brilliantly transferred one sense for the other.

Connection of words:

In this Ode one can't help but notice the connection of one verse with the other. The words he uses in the last line of one verse, the thought is repeated in the beginning lines of the following verse. This gives the reader a sense of connection and it is difficult then to stray away from the main theme. Examples: Forest dim\fade, Beyond tomorrow/Away away, Verdurous gloom/cannot see, Requiem/not born of death.

Consonance:

Embalmed darkness guess. The 'ess' produces a hissing sound which gives the verse a soft touch.

Strange Collocation:

Melodious plot in the first verse can be viewed as a fascinating collocation. Plot is used for a piece of land where construction has not begun yet. Melodious is used with plot to bring a drab piece of

land alive. In the case of the Ode, it is the Nightingale which brings the whole atmosphere alive with her melodious voice.

My Perception:

I thoroughly enjoyed Ode to a Nightingale. It is beautifully written. One can't help but notice the bell curve the Ode moulds into. At one point in the Ode the heart of Keats take flight with the nightingale and the reader can also enjoy this beautiful experience. For Keats the bird is immortal as her song's magic will be enjoyed by generations to come. Keats realizes that he has to bid farewell to the bird as it takes flight to explore other pastures and provide pleasure to others. Every beautiful experience is captured by the heart and it remains there forever. One can always enjoy the timeless beauty of nature regardless of time and place, be it the Nightingale's song or the sight of the beautiful Daffodils.

Biography:

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Ajarn Afsheen Sardar has been teaching at ABAC since 2009. She earned a Master's degree from Assumption University in English Language and Literatures. She received her CELTA qualification from Nottingham University (England). Afsheen Sardar has been involved in research since she started teaching she presented her work in an international conference: Theory at Work: Text, History and Culture, which was published in the ACSA conference in 2010. Further, her Paper on 'Emotional Journey of Salman Rushdie After the Fatwa' was presented in absentia at the Varanasi University in India. Currently she is preparing to present a paper in the upcoming NIDA conference. Her research is based on 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' by Azar Nafisi, the research explores feminist issues.