

Study Material for Semester-IV
CC - IX: British Romantic Literature
“Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats
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Introduction:

“Ode to a Nightingale” is a poem by John Keats written either in the garden of the Spaniards Inn, Hampstead, London or, according to Keats’ friend Charles Armitage Brown, under a plum tree in the garden of Keats’ house at Wentworth Place, also in Hampstead. According to Brown, a nightingale had built its nest near the house that he shared with Keats in the spring of 1819. Inspired by the bird’s song, Keats composed the poem in one day. It soon became one of his 1819 odes and was first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts* the following July. The poem is one of the most frequently anthologized in the English language.

“Ode to a Nightingale” is a personal poem which describes Keats’s journey into the state of negative capability. The tone of the poem rejects the optimistic pursuit of pleasure found within Keats’s earlier poems and, instead, explores the themes of nature, transience and mortality, the latter being particularly relevant to Keats.

The nightingale described experiences a type of death but does not actually die. Instead, the songbird is capable of living through its song, which is a fate that humans cannot expect. The poem ends with an acceptance that pleasure cannot last and that death is an inevitable part of life. In the poem, Keats imagines the loss of the physical world and sees himself dead—as a “sod” over which the nightingale sings. The contrast between the immortal nightingale and mortal man sitting in his garden, is made all the more acute by an effort of the imagination. The presence of weather is noticeable in the poem, as spring came early in 1819, bringing nightingales all over the heath.

Background of the Poem:

Of Keats’s six major odes of 1819, “Ode to Psyche”, was probably written first and “To Autumn” written last. Sometime between these two, he wrote “Ode to a Nightingale”. It is possible that “Ode to a Nightingale” was written between 26 April and 18 May 1819, based on weather conditions and similarities between images in the poem and those in a letter sent to Fanny Brawne on May Day. The poem was composed at the Hampstead house Keats shared with Brown, possibly while sitting beneath a plum tree in the garden. According to Keats’ friend Brown, Keats finished the ode in just one morning: “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 feelings on the song of the nightingale.” Brown’s account

is personal, as he claimed the poem was directly influenced by his house and preserved by his own doing. However, Keats relied on both his own imagination and other literature as sources for his depiction of the nightingale.

Theme of 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.” Of course, the nightingale’s song is the dominant image and dominant “voice” within the ode. The nightingale is also the object of empathy and praise within the poem. However, the nightingale and the discussion of the nightingale is not simply about the bird or the song, but about human experience in general. This is not to say that the song is a simple metaphor, but it is a complex image that is formed through the interaction of the conflicting voices of praise and questioning. On this theme, David Perkins summarizes the way “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” perform this when he says, “we are dealing with a talent, indeed an entire approach to poetry, in which symbol, however necessary, may possibly not satisfy as the principal concern of poetry, any more than it could with Shakespeare, but is rather an element in the poetry and drama of human reactions”. However, there is a difference between an urn and a nightingale in that the nightingale is not an eternal entity. Furthermore, in creating any aspect of the nightingale immortal during the poem the narrator separates any union that he can have with the nightingale.

The nightingale’s song within the poem is connected to the art of music in a way that the urn in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is connected to the art of sculpture. As such, the nightingale would represent an enchanting presence and, unlike the urn, is directly connected to nature. As natural music, the song is for beauty and lacks a message of truth. Keats follows Coleridge’s belief, as found in “The Nightingale”, in separating from the world by losing himself in the bird’s song. Although Keats favours a female nightingale over Coleridge’s masculine bird, both reject the traditional depiction of the nightingale as related to the tragedy of Philomela. Their songbird is a happy nightingale that lacks the melancholic feel of previous poetic depictions. The bird is only a voice within the poem, but it is a voice that compels the narrator to join with in and forget the sorrows of the world. However, there is tension in that the narrator holds Keats’s guilt regarding the death of Tom Keats, his brother. The song’s conclusion represents the result of trying to escape into the realm of fancy.

Like Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark”, Keats’s narrator listens to a bird song, but listening to the song within “Ode to a Nightingale” is almost painful and similar to death. The narrator seeks to be with the nightingale and abandons his sense of vision in order to embrace the sound in an attempt to share in the darkness with the bird. As the poem ends, the trance caused by the nightingale is broken and the narrator is left wondering if it was a real vision or just a

dream. The poem's reliance on the process of sleeping is common to Keats's poems, and "Ode to a Nightingale" shares many of the same themes as Keats' *Sleep and Poetry* and *Eve of St. Agnes*. This further separates the image of the nightingale's song from its closest comparative image, the urn as represented in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". The nightingale is distant and mysterious, and even disappears at the end of the poem. The dream image emphasizes the shadowiness and elusiveness of the poem. These elements make it impossible for there to be a complete self-identification with the nightingale, but it also allows for self-awareness to permeate throughout the poem, albeit in an altered state.

Midway through the poem, there is a split between the two actions of the poem: the first attempts to identify with the nightingale and its song, and the second discusses the convergence of the past with the future while experiencing the present. This second theme is reminiscent of Keats's view of human progression through the *Mansion of Many Apartments* and how man develops from experiencing and wanting only pleasure to understanding truth as a mixture of both pleasure and pain. The Elysian fields and the nightingale's song in the first half of the poem represent the pleasurable moments that overwhelm the individual like a drug. However, the experience does not last forever, and the body is left desiring it until the narrator feels helpless without the pleasure. Instead of embracing the coming truth, the narrator clings to poetry to hide from the loss of pleasure. Poetry does not bring about the pleasure that the narrator originally asks for, but it does liberate him from his desire for only pleasure.

Responding to this emphasis on pleasure, 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. This loss of pleasure and incorporation of death imagery lends the poem a dark air, which connects “Ode to a Nightingale” with Keats’ other poems that discuss the demonic nature of poetic imagination, including *Lamia*. In the poem, Keats imagines the loss of the physical world and sees himself dead—he uses an abrupt, almost brutal word for it—as a “sod” over which the nightingale sings. The contrast between the immortal nightingale and mortal man, sitting in his garden, is made all the more acute by an effort of the imagination.

Summary of the Poem

Keats is in a state of uncomfortable drowsiness. Envy of the imagined happiness of the nightingale is not responsible for his condition; rather, it is a reaction to the happiness he has experienced through sharing in the happiness of the nightingale. The bird’s happiness is conveyed in its singing.

Keats longs for a draught of wine which would take him out of himself and allow him to join his existence with that of the bird. The wine would put him in a state in which he would no longer be himself, aware that life is full of pain, that the young die, the old suffer, and that just to think about life brings sorrow and despair. But wine is not needed to enable him to escape. His imagination will serve just as well. As soon as he realizes this, he is, in spirit, lifted up above the trees and can see the moon and the stars even though where he is physically there is only a glimmering of light. He cannot see what flowers are growing around him, but from their odor and from his knowledge of what flowers should be in bloom at the time he can guess.

In the darkness he listens to the nightingale. Now, he feels, it would be a rich experience to die, “to cease upon the midnight with no pain” while the bird would continue to sing ecstatically. Many a time, he confesses, he has been “half in love with easeful Death.” The nightingale is free from the human fate of having to die. The song of the nightingale that he is listening to was heard in ancient times by emperor and peasant. Perhaps even Ruth (whose story is told in the Old Testament) heard it.

“Forlorn,” the last word of the preceding stanza, brings Keats in the concluding stanza back to consciousness of what he is and where he is. He cannot escape even with the help of the imagination. The singing of the bird grows fainter and dies away. The experience he has had seems so strange and confusing that he is not sure whether it was a vision or a daydream. He is even uncertain whether he is asleep or awake.

Analysis

The “Ode to a Nightingale” is a regular ode. All eight stanzas have ten pentameter lines and a uniform rhyme scheme. Although the poem is regular in form, it leaves the impression of being a kind of rhapsody; Keats is allowing his thoughts and emotions free expression. One thought suggests another and, in this way, the poem proceeds to a somewhat arbitrary conclusion. The poem impresses the reader as being the result of free inspiration uncontrolled by a preconceived plan. The poem is Keats in the act of sharing with the reader an experience he is having rather than recalling an experience. The experience is not entirely coherent. It is what happens in his mind while he is listening to the song of a nightingale.

Three main thoughts stand out in the ode. One is Keats' evaluation of life; life is a vale of tears and frustration. The happiness which Keats hears in the song of the nightingale has made him happy momentarily but has been succeeded by a feeling of torpor which in turn is succeeded by the conviction that life is not only painful but also intolerable. His taste of happiness in hearing the nightingale has made him all the more aware of the unhappiness of life. Keats wants to escape from life, not by means of wine, but by a much more powerful agent, the imagination.

The second main thought and the main theme of the poem is Keats' wish that he might die and be rid of life altogether, providing he could die as easily and painlessly as he could fall asleep. The preoccupation with death does not seem to have been caused by any turn for the worse in Keats' fortunes at the time he wrote the ode (May 1819). In many respects Keats' life had been unsatisfactory for some time before he wrote the poem. His family life was shattered by the departure of one brother to America and the death from tuberculosis of the other. His second volume of poetry had been harshly reviewed. He had no gainful occupation and no prospects, since he had abandoned his medical studies. His financial condition was insecure. He had not been well in the fall and winter of 1818-19 and possibly he was already suffering from tuberculosis. He could not marry Fanny Brawne because he was not in a position to support her. Thus the death-wish in the ode may be a reaction to a multitude of troubles and frustrations, all of which were still with him. The heavy weight of life pressing down on him forced "Ode to a Nightingale" out of him. Keats more than once expressed a desire for "easeful Death," yet when he was in the final stages of tuberculosis he fought against death by going to Italy where he hoped the climate would cure him. The death-wish in the ode is a passing but recurrent attitude toward a life that was unsatisfactory in so many ways.

The third main thought in the ode is the power of imagination or fancy. (Keats does not make any clear-cut distinction between the two.) In the ode Keats rejects wine for poetry, the product of imagination, as a means of identifying his existence with that of the happy nightingale. But poetry does not work the way it is supposed to. He soon finds himself back with his everyday, trouble-filled self. That "fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do," he admits in the concluding stanza. The imagination is not the all-powerful function Keats, at times, thought it was. It cannot give more than a temporary escape from the cares of life.

Keats' assignment of immortality to the nightingale in stanza VII has caused readers much trouble. Keats perhaps was thinking of a literal nightingale; more likely, however, he was thinking of the nightingale as a symbol of poetry, which has a permanence.

Keats' evocative power is shown especially in stanza II where he associates a beaker of wine "with beaded bubbles winking at the brim," with sunny France and the "sunburnt mirth" of the harvesters, and in his picture in stanza VII of Ruth suffering from homesickness "amid the alien corn." The whole ode is a triumph of tonal richness of that adagio verbal music that is Keats' special contribution to the many voices of poetry.
