

# Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats: Critical Appreciation

## Summary

Keats's Ode to a Nightingale is considered one of the finest odes in English Literature. The poem was inspired by the song of a nightingale, which the poet heard in the gardens of his friend Charles Brown. The sweet music of the nightingale sent the poet in rapture and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table, put it on the grass-plot under the plum tree and composed the poem. Thus the poem is an expression of Keats's feelings rising in his heart at the hearing of the melodious song of the bird. He thinks that the bird lives in a place of beauty. When he hears the nightingale's song, he is influenced by its sweetness and his joy becomes so excessive that it changes into a kind of pleasant pain. He is filled with a desire to escape from the world of caring to the world of beautiful place of the bird.

## CRITICAL APPRECIATION

In the beginning, On hearing the musical voice of the nightingale, he feels that it is an immortal voice of happiness. Keats feels that his body is getting benumbed. But, he also feels an acute pain because he is conscious of his mortality and suffering. He fantasizes of having drunk hemlock or 'some dull opiate': "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains, / my sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk." The tragic awareness of suffering inflicts on him a peculiar kind of ache because the opposing effect of dullness, which is the effect of desire, is increasing. The awareness is a burden that makes him 'sunk' gradually towards the world of oblivion.

After describing his plight, Keats is jealous of the bird's 'happy lot' and participates in its permanent happiness. He identifies the bird with dryad, the Greek Goddess of the tree. He contrasts the mortality and suffering of human being with the immortality and perfect happiness of the nightingale. Keats immortalizes the bird by considering it the symbol of universal and undying musical voice. This universal and eternal voice has comforted human beings embittered by life and tragedies. The poet is longing for the imaginative experience of a perfect world. At this stage in the poem, the poet is trying to escape from the reality, and experience the ideal world. Keats begins by urging for poison and wine,

and then desires for poetic imagination. As the poem develops, poet's numbness and intoxication imposed upon his senses slowly disappear and he is awakened to a higher sense of experience. The vintage, dance and song, the waters of poetic inspiration are the warmth of the south together make a compound and sensuous appeal.

The fretful life of human beings and eternal happiness of the nightingale are in sharp contrast with each other. Keats now feels revived into a special awareness of the conflict and wants to create a balance between the transient life of human beings, which is full of sufferings and pain, and the eternal life of happiness, which the nightingale has. In fact, Imaginative minds can have a momentary flight into the fanciful reduced. The poet makes imaginative flights into the ideal world, but accepts the realities of life despite its 'fever, fret and fury'.

The song of the bird symbolizes the song of the poet. Keats is contrasting the immortality of poetry with the mortality of the poet. This is the climax of the poem, where the beauty of the nightingale's song, the loveliness of the Spring night, the miseries of the world, the desire to escape from those miseries by death, by wine, or by poetry are brought together in harmony.

The Ode is not the expression of a single mood, but of a succession of moods. From being too happy in the happiness of the bird's song, Keats becomes aware of the contrast between the bird's apparent joy and the misery of the human condition, from the thought of which he can only momentarily escape by wine, by poetry, by the beauty of nature, or by the thought of death. In the seventh stanza the contrast is sharpened: the immortal bird, representing natural beauty as well as poetry, is set against the 'hungry generations' of mankind. Keats expresses the desire to escape from reality, and yet he recognizes that no escape is possible.

One kind of mastery displayed by Keats in this ode is worth noting—the continuous shifting of view-point. We are transported from the poet in the garden to the bird in the trees; in the second stanza we have glimpses of Flora and Provence, followed by one of the poets drinking the wine; in the fourth stanza we are taken up into the starlit skies, and in the next we are back again in the flower-scented darkness. In the seventh stanza we rang furthest in time and place. The nightingale's song is unrestricted by either time or space. The voice of the nightingale is made immune first to history, and then to geography. It can establish a rapport with dead generations or with faery lands. In the

last stanza we start again from the Hampstead garden, and then follow the nightingale as it disappears in the distance.

To sum up, Keats soars high with his 'wings of poesy' into the world of ideas and perfect happiness. But the next moment, consciousness makes him land on the grounds of reality and he bids farewell to the ideal bird. At this moment, Keats must also have been conscious that the very bird, which he had idealized and immortalized, existed in the real world, mortal and vulnerable to change and suffering like himself.

***References:***

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