
A DISCUSSION OF JOHN KEATS'S *ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE*

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Abstract

John Keats passes away at an early age but leaves many outstanding works behind. In his Ode to a Nightingale, the poet sees suffering on the earth and highly appreciates a nightingale's marvelous music. This article discusses the pain-pleasure contrast and association in terms of the poet and the nightingale. It also explores the use of time and space in the poem. It is important to know where and when the bird is singing and the poet is sitting, listening to the bird's music. The use of imagery and symbols in the poem is very significant to connect the poet's world with that of the bird. Art, death and life can be drawn as major themes in the poem. In order to strengthen the discussion, various books and critics' opinions concerning Keats, the respective poem and Romanticism have been consulted. The discussion reveals the poet's ugly and painful world which is real and the nightingale's beautiful and pleasurable world which is ideal. The real contrasts from the ideal and sometimes they get associated with each other. In exclusion of the ideal, the real suffers and gets confused.

Keywords: *negative capability, setting, theme, symbols and imagery, real and ideal.*

John Keats, a renowned poet of the second-generation Romantic poets, was born in London in 1795. His father, a head hostler at a London livery stable, had four children- three sons (John, the first-born) and a daughter. John Keats had to face the loss of his parents in his boyhood. His father died from falling from a horse when he was 8 and his mother died of tuberculosis when he was 14. In 1816 John Keats was in the capacity of practicing as an apothecary, but later influenced by Leigh Hunt, a poet and a critic, he gave up medicine and opted for poetry. His brother George immigrated to Kentucky in 1818. His brother Tom died of tuberculosis in December 1818. The year 1818 remained full of despair and obstacles for John Keats. He himself contracted tuberculosis that year. Keats's poetry, financial drawbacks, and ill-health resulted in a fiasco in changing his love with Fanny Brawne, a young lady with a little interest in poetry whom he had fallen in love in the late fall of 1818, into marriage. Time did not favour Keats. It engulfed him at an early age. On February 23, 1821, he breathed his last in Rome, Italy where he had gone in the autumn of the previous year seeking a suitable climate for his health. "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." This is what Keats chose as an epitaph for his gravestone. Some of Keats's finest poetry include *Sleep and Poetry*, *Endymion*, all six of the *Odes*, *Lamia* and *Isabella*. John Keats has reached the apex of English literature in his short poetic career. He stopped writing at the age of 24. His poetic height exceeds or equals to that of his favorites-Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare at their corresponding age. Matthew Arnold writes:

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Keats himself, too, exhibits in his poetic expressions. No one else in English poetry, save Shakespeare, has in expression quite the fascinating felicity of Keats, his perfection of loveliness. 'I think', he said humbly, 'I shall be among the English poets after my death'. He is; he is with Shakespeare" (14).

Ode to a Nightingale begins with "My heart aches and 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:" These pathetic and bitter words make us infer the poet is expressing his pangs he has experienced on account of his poverty, love-tragedy, untimely demise of his family members and his ruined health. He feels as if he has had some poison or he has bathed in the Lethe and forgotten his bitter past. The music of the nightingale the poet is listening to is enchanting him. He is too happy in the nightingale's happiness. Harold Bloom says- "Keats is not envious of the bird, but is "too happy" in its happiness. He can't sustain his own "negative capability" in this case: he has yielded his being too readily to that of the bird." The poet's life is painful. He is of course unhappy in life. The bird's music heals his pain to some extent. His remarks are didactic. We may be happy or unhappy, we should be happy in others' happiness. The poem has a humanitarian touch. Keats fails to detach from the nightingale's sweet music. He gets lost in it like an ordinary human. Keats also enters into emotions and imagines being with the bird. He is not jealous of the bird's joy. He praises the bird and forgets his pangs for the time being. Although Keats and the bird are separate entities, it is also true that they are parts of nature. So, they are connected with each other in terms of sharing pain and pleasure. In other words, the poem also focuses on human-nature relationship. Nature and man are both isolated and connected. This paradoxical relationship between the poet and the bird can be well traced in the poem.

Ode to a Nightingale was written in May 1819 but regarding the exact date the conjecture we can make on the basis of the fifth stanza mentioning some plants and trees, and "mid-May's eldest child' is the early or middle of the month. Duncan Wu edits Charles Brown's remarks:

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 a 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 there he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry I found those scraps, four or five in number, containing his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale. The writing was not well legible; and it was difficult to arrange the stanzas on so many scraps. With his assistance I succeeded, and this was his *Ode to a Nightingale*, a poem which has been the delight of every one. (1058)

A work of art delights the audience. Perusing *Ode to a Nightingale* amuses everyone. It's melodious and the amalgam of pain and pleasure stipulated in the poem evokes the feelings of solace in the mind. Keats' opinion in his *Endymion*- Book I "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." (57) strikes and makes a reader think that a poem itself is a thing of beauty. In the present poem, the nightingale is also beautiful. Its music is mellifluous. Keats' world is more often tragic owing to his won hardships in life. Some critics like John Barnard have doubted Brown's story. Keats's draft is said to have been written on two sheets of paper only. Moreover, Brown talks about a nest near his house and that Keats creates the scraps on a spring morning. This setting seems to be less plausible to match the ideas inherent in the poem.

The nightingale inspires Keats. The bird's music lessens his pain. Duncan Wu in *Romanticism* remembers William Hone's remarks, "...whereon I last saw poor Keats, the poet of the 'Pot of Basil,' sitting and sobbing his dying breath into a handkerchief, - gleaning parting looks towards the quiet landscape he had delighted in -musing, as in his 'Ode to a Nightingale'"(1012). These remarks consolidate the opinion that the nightingale is a source of delight for the poet.

Where is the nightingale singing- in the sky or in a tree or in the nest of Brown's story? And where is the poet sitting and listening to the bird's music? The actual locations are not specified in the poem but certain ideas in this regard can be generated as per the clues found in the poem. The poem reads: "That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,/In some melodious plot/Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,/ Singest of summer in full-throated ease." The bird is invisible to the poet. He is just listening to its song. The poet seems to be uncertain about the location the bird is singing. The bird's singing of summer in full-throated ease may signify comfort, openness and freedom. If the bird is singing in the nest or in the nest-tree/garden, the bird could be closer to the poet's presence; instead the poet seems to distance from the unspecified location.

Keats longs for wine. In the letter of Feb-May 1819 to his brother George, he writes, "now I like Claret- 'tis the only palate affair that I am at all sensual in ..." The poet writes, "That! might drink, and leave the world unseen,/ And with thee fade away into the forest dim:" The poet, with imagination to be in intoxication of vintage, no longer wishes to see the world but instead disappear with the bird in the dark forest. He wants to escape from the actual world of weariness, pain and sorrow. The bird is going away into the dark forest. The poet is bored with this ugly, painful world. He wants to go away and get lost with the bird. The bird's world is imaginary or ideal. The poet's world is real and ugly. The poet longs to vanish in the ideal world.

Keats further writes, "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 gray hairs,". In these lines, the poet shows a great distinction between the bird's world and his world. The bird "among the leaves" has never experienced the pangs the poet has "here" which he wants to forget fading far away. The location of the bird and that of the poet might signify the notion of the earth and the heaven. "Here" is a general term to signify the place where we humans are residing and even thinking is painful as our disasters get reflected while thinking. Every creature on the earth is destined to misery. The poet gradually makes the bird's location very symbolic and glorious. His location "here" and the bird's location "among the leaves" are distinctly described. "Here" is very disgusting and irritating to the poet, whereas, "among the leaves" is auspicious and healing. Two worlds clearly appear in the poem –the poet's own world and that of the bird. Symbolically, the poet might connect the bird's world with the world after one's death. Literally, the bird's world is a forest but metaphorically it is somewhere envisaged after death. Glennis Byron writes:

The poem is basically structured around the contrast between the poet, who is earthbound, and the bird, which is free. A related opposition is that between the mortal world, full of sorrow and marked by transience, and the world of the nightingale, marked by joy and immortality (36).

In *The Works of John Keats*, the lines read: " 'Ode to a Nightingale is more complex, bringing many of the preoccupations already noted, lonely and depressed at night, the poet hears the nightingale which really did sing on Hampstead Heath near the house where he was living" (xiv).

This opinion literally stipulates the use of time and space in *Ode to a Nightingale*. Some more clues helping to clarify the space and time employed in the poem can be traced in the following stanza:

Away! away! For I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 But on the viewless wings 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.

The bird is flying and the poet longs to fly to it by dint of his viewless wings of poetry. The time is the night, it is tender, a starry night. The poet is in the dark. His imagination will be taking him with the invisible bird. How marvelous! The music of the bird, the imagined flight of the bird and the poet himself and the twinkling galaxy in the sky will relieve the poet of his sorrow. Perhaps it could be a foretold joy through the nightingale the poet would get after his death as he has had injustice by fate on the earth. Had the bird not been in the sky and the time not been the night, such an ecstasy could not have been inaugurated in the poem and moreover the paradoxical association between pain and pleasure could not have been maintained.

The poet is in search of light. The poet might think the bird's space is full of light. Perhaps it is beyond the physical world. The setting of the poem signifies somewhere else beyond the real world. Literally, the space may be the sky and the bird's flight may go down into the forest and the time is night or dark. Metaphorically, the space may be the heaven or somewhere else away from the real world. The time, maybe uniquely bright, prevails in the heaven. The poet gets amalgamated with the bird through his imagination. The poet's imaginary flight with the bird relieves him of the earthly gloom and grievances. The poet intends to leave the frustrating world and reach where there is no fever, anguish, darkness and fatigue.

The poet can't see the flowers at his feet and the soft incense hanging upon the boughs. He can smell the scent of plants. The night is embalmed and the time is favorable. The month is seasonable. The coming musk-rose, mid-May's eldest child, attracts many insects. The poet may be sitting in a glade or near a meadow. He is not caring his space, just focused on the bird's music. The poem goes on: "To take into the air my quiet breath;/ Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain-/To thy high requiem become a sod." The poet perhaps foresees his early demise. He says he has been half in love with easeful Death. He opines it seems rich to die. Now his heart is aching. If he dies, he will have no pain, but the bird will be singing and his ears will be in vain to listen to it. He will be a sod to the bird's high

requiem then. The poet feels hard to live due to pain and he is dying. He prefers to die. He is tired of this ugly and unjustifiable world. He is in quest of a better world, the world one might enter after demise. The poet also seems to have some regret in the sense after his death he will miss the bird's music, that is to say, he wishes he would be able to listen to the bird's music even in his new world.

The poet points to the contrast between the bird and himself. He addresses the bird immortal. Glennis Byron comments- "One of the points that has troubled many critics is this claim of immortality of the nightingale: 'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!' The nightingale is, after all, a natural creature" (36). Robert Bridges has made a comment on the line as nonsense. It is generally said that a nightingale starts singing in England in mid-April. The poet has glorified the nightingale. Literally it is a common bird but symbolically it can be legendary, having some angelic qualities. The nightingale's song is immortal. It lures the poet. In its absence, he worries. David Daiches writes, "... the nightingale's song as a symbol of the timeless, of the escapes from time and change, and the relation between art, death and life is the true theme of the poem" (920).

The poem possesses lots of symbolic significance. The setting in the poem is symbolic. The bird's flight is symbolic. The bird itself is symbolic. The nightingale symbolizes the healthy and happy poet Keats. The poet now is unhealthy and unhappy. If he is free from sickness, pain and worry, he may be like the nightingale sweet and free and a source of happiness for others. Keats' technique of presenting the bird simple to extraordinary is wonderful. He immortalizes the bird. The bird's music is mellifluous and pleasurable.

Keats's use of synesthesia in the lines "tasting of Flora and the country green,/Dance , and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth;" beautifully exemplifies the use of such imagery in the Romantic poetry. The poet longs to drink wine that should taste of different senses. The taste is psychological and imaginary. A particular sense is compared to other senses. M. H. Abrams states, "Keats in 'The Ode to a Nightingale' calls for a draught of wine ... that is, he calls for a drink tasting of sight, colour, motion, sound, and heat" (210).

Now the music of the bird fades and despite his viewless wings of poetry, the poet is left alone or isolated from the bird's song. In the course of the poem the poet is lost in the ecstasy of the bird. The refrain, the repetition of the word 'forlorn', suggests the distance and separation between the poet and the unseen flight of the bird whose song fades and finally it is buried deep in the next valley-glades. The poem reads, "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:" The poet is in sorrow. His heart is aching. He misses the bird's music. For some time, the bird's music has kept his pangs at bay. Now again, he returns to his painful state in the absence of the bird's music. The nightingale's music has become a painkiller, a medicine, for him but when it fades away, he will again suffer. His nightingale's music is sweet, transitory, and its loss saddens him.

The distance and the separation are very important to view the actuality of the world. When the unseen bird is flying away, the poet comes to realize that the imagination or his viewless wings of poetry remain a kind of deception for him. The bird's wonderful music now comes to be a plaintive anthem as it fades, and its sweet memory would be another blow to the poet. Needless to say he has lost many sweet things before such as his parents, beloved and sound health. Now he

has lost the nightingale's music. Perhaps the nightingale does not know about the poet's pain. It does not wait for him. Sharon Ruston writes:

In Shelley's ode 'To a Skylark', the poet wishes that he could sing as the bird does, but recognizes that, like Keats's nightingale, the only reason that birds sing in this way is because they have not experienced the pain and suffering that humans experience (68).

Keats closely observes the contrasts between the real and the ideal. He suffers from worry and weariness in the real world. The world of the nightingale is full of peace and joy. This sense of pain in the real world and of pleasure in the ideal world can be a characteristic of the romantic poetry. A. C. Bradley writes:

Our human life is all unrest and sorrow, an oscillation between longing and satiety, a looking before and after. We are aware of a perfection that we cannot attain, and that leaves us dissatisfied by everything attainable. And we die and do not understand death. But the bird is beyond this division and dissonance; it attains the ideal (228).

The bird's music thrills him but it fades away. He thinks it has betrayed him. In a dilemma, the poet finally writes, "Was it a vision or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music- Do I wake or sleep?" The fragile and aching body of the poet feels better by dint of the bird's music. When the music vanishes, the poet gets puzzled. The music, a pleasant thing, comes to him and disappears. He is confused whether it is a dream or reality. This situation universally falls upon everyone. Life is full of vicissitudes. Events occur in life and vanish like dreams. The poet takes the music as a dream. It is difficult for him to forget it. Perhaps the riddle between the actual world of pain where he is living and the bird's marvelous world of pleasure he has just experienced strikes him.

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