

"ode to a nightingale" by john keats essay sample

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“ Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats Essay Sample

In his poem “ Ode to a Nightingale,” John Keats uses powerful, distinct symbolism and imagery. The nightingale, for instance, is interpreted by many to be a symbol of Keats’ poetic inspiration and satisfaction. This symbolism can be seen by the vivid descriptions Keats gives the nightingale. However, the nightingale is definitely not the only item of symbolism in “ Ode to a Nightingale.” In a short piece of art, Keats apparently has mastered using many different items, phrases, and brilliant, descriptive metaphorical text to symbolize something he yearns for. Countless pieces of the poem indicate that he also wishes for immortality and the ability to escape from reality and into another state of consciousness and the ecstasy of the nightingale’s song – its peace, its happiness.

“ Ode to a Nightingale” is relevant to the themes Keats explores in his poems and “ odes.” In an extremely imperfect, unharmonious world of reality, the author yearns for a way to escape the difficulties of reality and human life. In an attempt to accomplish his escape, Keats tries to enter the life of the nightingale. He uses the strong symbolic meaning of the nightingale and its world to escape from harsh reality. In the poem, John Keats even transforms the bird to become immortal. While exploring numerous ways to join the bird forever in its “ song,” Keats is unfortunately forced to realize that escaping from reality to the nightingale is impossible.

First of all, the nightingale is the main feature and piece of symbolism in “ Ode to a Nightingale.” Historically, birds have always been the ideal symbol of freedom and inspiration. The fashion in which Keats describes the

nightingale plays a central part to the reading of the poem. In the first stanza, Keats describes the bird as a "...light-winged Dryad of the trees" (Keats, line 7). The "light wings" of the nightingale, or any bird for that matter, is the reason it has the ability to soar freely above us all.

Furthermore, it can be interpreted that unlike humans, inspiration does not have boundaries nor forces to hold it back. Also in stanza one, "...shadows numberless, / Singest of summer in full-throated ease" (lines 10-11), indicates how inspiration can easily surpass boundaries and how poetry, or the nightingale's song in this instance, has the power to put man into the realm of imagination.

In the third stanza, Keats aches for fine wine in order to escape and "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget (line 21). Although at quick thought, it may seem Keats wants to escape through drinking, this line actually indicates more than that. The particular line is also an indication of wishing for escapism through poetry. This is exhibited when Keats wishes for a wine "Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene" (line 16). Hippocrene is the sacred fountain of the Muses, who were beings of inspiration for many artists and poets (Cooper, p. 14). Once again, another symbol of Keats' wish for inspiration.

Another thing Keats yearns for is immortality. This is seen most strongly in the third stanza where he mourns, "Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow" (lines 29-30). The sorrows of life seem to have a connection with the mortality of humans. In stanza seven, the nightingale is transformed from a mortal bird to its symbolic and

immortal form – poetic inspiration. This is suggested when Keats exclaims, “Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!” (line 61) and “The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown” (lines 63-64). Though it may be hard to grasp the imagination of how a simple bird could be immortal, it is possible to see this if one values the nightingale as a metaphorical symbol for poetic inspiration, like Keats intention seems. By doing so, it suddenly becomes much easier to understand the nightingale’s superiority to the boundary of time and place.

Keats touches on a number of ways to avoid and escape reality. This is evident in stanza one where he names a poison, hemlock (line 2), and narcotic drugs. In addition, Keats also uses wine, memory loss, imagination, and even death itself as a form of elusion from the cruel and brutal realities of a world he describes as “Where but to think is to be full of sorrow” (line 27).

By an effort of the imagination, Keats attempts to suppress all knowledge of the human suffering made evident in stanza three. He seeks to completely enter into the ecstasy of the nightingale’s song so he becomes nothing more than an instrument recording the tiniest of physical sensation. For example, in stanza five, Keats describes the beauty of a place in the most minute detail. Since he is unable to actually “see” this place, he is using the sheer force of his imagination. In this particular stanza, the use of imagery is indeed present. The soft sounds and descriptions of flowers yield a very enchanting and beautiful atmosphere. Where Keats says, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain, / While

thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!" (lines 55-58), is an indication of how he believes it would be marvelous for his life to end in such a state of blissful heaven. However, the irony of this is that, in Keats' case, death would mean the end of the nightingale's song. He realizes this when he says, " Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain – / to thy high requiem become a sod." (lines 59-60). This piece is an indication of Keats' enchantment with the nightingale and its song.

In addition to the above, the entire poem indicates the continuous mood swings from one stanza to another. There are extremely subtle and varied interaction of motions – first directed positively, and later negatively. For instance, in the first stanza, Keats' " Heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My senses, as though of hemlock I had drunk" (lines 1-2). However, Keats also associates both happiness and extreme pain and paints them in such a way to make them related.

In the final stanza, Keats finally realizes that he is unable to follow the nightingale as he had hoped; its song has the ability to only momentarily separate him from himself and the fiction of his imagination, and cannot be sustained any longer. This realization is apparent when he says, " Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well" (line 73). As he continues to listen to the nightingale's song, the melody fades into the distance like a mere illusion: " Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?" (line 80). From there, Keats is reluctantly returned to reality and is no longer enveloped in the ecstasy of the creature's beautiful, peaceful song.

"Ode to a Nightingale" is essentially Keats' quest for poetic inspiration and fulfillment. The author uses many symbolic meanings to indicate this. Keats' descriptions essentially transform the nightingale from its mortal form to an immortal creature of inspiration. These descriptions indicate how the nightingale is able to transcend any and all boundaries of human life and reality. The countless imagery Keats uses throughout the poem is a further enhancement of Keats' intentions, as does his lamentation of the woes of mortality and jubilation as a result of the nightingale's immortality. With the numerous amounts of symbols, imagery, and metaphors embedded into "Ode," John Keats has created a very strong, enchanting poem. Although it is probably based on how he felt at that time, it is one poem that everyone else can relate to – the desire to escape into something or somewhere more desirable.

Works Cited

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