

John Keats – ode to a nightingale criticism

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Keats is in love with a nightingale. He is at a loss of how to feel; happy for witnessing the bird's 'high requiem', or sad for not being part of its world. In the first stanza the poet is having clear symptoms of an extreme sadness. His 'heart aches' and a drowsy numbness pains' his sense. This heavy mood is paradoxically denounced in the same stanza. It's 'being too happy' in the nightingale's happiness that's causing the malaise. The stanza comes to an end in a joyful mood as opposed to the heavy start of the poem. He imagines the bird's home as 'some melodious plot of beechen green'.

Through this synaesthesia he creates a vivid picture of one of his classic bowers. The second stanza opens with a plea 'for a drought of vintage' through which he can fulfill his plea to 'fade away'. This stanza evokes a lot of appeal to the sense of taste, 'tasting of flora and country green'. The theme of nature together with a joyful atmosphere is also evident. 'Dance, and provencal song, and sunburnt mirth'. From the comfort of the dreamy second stanza, the third plunges the reader into the sad reality and banality of life. 'The weariness, the fever, and the fret' are a reality that the nightingale doesn't know.

Here 'youth grows pale' and 'beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes'. This sombre stanza induces a feeling of a disappointing reality. It's much better to belong to a dream than to this painful truth. This stanza is also a typical example of Keats's obsession with illness and death. He decides to 'fly' to the nightingale's realm. However he won't do this through substance he pondered about in the first two stanzas, but through 'the viewless wings of poetry'. This is a eulogy to poetry and its ability to take the reader to the spiritual realm of imagination.

He joins the nightingale where the trees let no light in except for when the wind moves their branches. The last three lines stress darkness and the gloomy colours of mundane existence. In the fifth stanza he cannot see what 'soft incense hangs upon the boughs'. This synaesthesia leads the reader to touch the scent. He is enveloped in 'embalmed darkness' - where balm is a sweet smelling fragrance - but he can still imagine all that there in its midst. Through the heavenly eyes of imagination he can see the 'white hawthorn and the pastoral eglantine'.

He can see 'fast fading violets' and the musk-rose that is full of 'dewy wine' to make sure we know that this world being described is the nightingale's not the poet's. He can also hear the 'murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves'. After experiencing the extreme joy of the nightingale's song he is finding it hard to go back to the harsh reality. He is playing with the tempting idea of an 'easeful Death'. It would be a happy death, 'now more than ever it seems rich to die', 'in such ecstasy'. But then his thought evolves further and understands that the nightingale would go on singing, and being death he would miss his 'high requiem'.

The switching from reality to fantasy keeps going on. The poet is back in the nightingale's realm. It seems that the switch occurred also in his mood. From the rather dark mood of the sixth stanza, the seventh stanza introduces us to a rather jubilant Keats. He's full of praise for the 'immortal bird' whose voice transcends from 'ancient days'. 'It was heard by emperor and clown', which perhaps implies that its song is for everyone. It was heard by Ruth, a biblical figure who has a 'sad heart' to alleviate her pains. Its song 'charm'd magic ceasments' of faery which are 'forlorn' and the seas which are 'perilous'.

These words hint at the pain described in the first stanza, a pain the poet is trying to escape. This idea of pain introduces us to the next stanza. The same word 'forlorn' wakes him up; reminds him of reality. 'Fancy' or imagination is seen as a cheater. He awakes from this delusion understanding where he really belongs. This brings him to question if it all was a 'vision, or a waking dream?' This is a reference to the transient and brief nature of imagination, perhaps the poem itself. It was all a momentary euphoria, 'fled is that music: - do I wake or sleep', it seems that the vision was too good to be true.