

Ode to a Nightingale

BY [JOHN KEATS](#)

My heart aches, and a 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:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness,—
 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.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
 Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
 And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
 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,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

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

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
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!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
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:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

In his 1819 poem “Ode to a Nightingale,” John Keats creates a persona who longs to identify with what he calls the “immortal Bird” so that he may fly away from his life of pain (Keats, line 61). The speaker wants to escape into the kind of immortality that the bird experiences — the immortality of poetry — rather than stay in his own world of death and disease.

While human life is ephemeral, creative expression is immortal.

Juxtaposition and Imagery

Keats’ persona juxtaposes his desire to “fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget” his worldly pain against his need to remain in the sensual world that he would miss if he truly did “fly to [the nightingale]” (21, 31). This speaker grows to understand that he cannot identify with the titular bird; he cannot join the “winged Dryad of the trees” because he is too closely aligned with the lush Earth, regardless of how ridden with death and disease Earth may be (7).

Imagery of flora and fauna reveal this realization, especially in the fifth stanza, when the speaker remarks that if he were to be immortalized with the nightingale, he would not be able to “see what flowers are at [his] feet” nor “the grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild” (41, 45). Here exists a crucial tension: the speaker wants the things he would leave behind him in his mortal life; “in embalmed darkness” he would long for “the coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine, / the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves” (43, 49–50).

He seems to accept that he must eventually die.

Meter and Rhyme

Each stanza consists of seven consecutive lines of iambic pentameter, followed by one of trimeter and two more of iambic pentameter.

Symbolism and Projection

The speaker ponders the symbolism of the nightingale in relation to his own situation, stuck between wanting to remain in the world of pain and poetry and wanting to transcend to a world of immortality.

The nightingale is a mythic symbol; the bird is immersed in nature and sings a “Provençal song,” acting as not only a figure of mythology but also as a figure for all that the speaker would like to become (14). The “immortal Bird” is a timelessly unseen creature that produces songs from hidden spots in the trees (61). Poets are similar in this way to

nightingales, for their poems are heard and loved by many but their bodies are not visualized nor their faces remembered alongside their words. Keats' persona associates the bird with what he wants to be: appreciated and heard, able to sing "of summer in full-throated ease" rather than in the sore-throated "drowsy numbness" that he experiences in his reality (10, 1). The speaker lifts himself into a mythic immortality by getting drunk "on the viewless wings of Poesy" (33), but pithily brings himself back down again by explaining that "here there is no light".

Keats' persona spends the vast majority of the poem trying to identify with this poetic bird, getting drunk on either "a draught of vintage" or losing himself "not charioted by Bacchus and his pards," but on the bird's music (11, 32). This motif of drunkenness serves to symbolize the dull pain of the natural world and to motivate an escape into another level of being; once the poet transcends reality and imagines himself projected into the nature where the bird is, he wants all of the sensual things that he would leave behind if he were *truly* projected into abstract immortality.