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§. Ode to a Nightingale - As a romantic
and sensuous poem.

→ Written in the Spring of 1819, Keats' Ode to a Nightingale was inspired by the joyful song of a nightingale that had built its nest close to the house of a friend in Hampstead. This bird's song often threw the poet into a sort of trance of tranquil pleasure. The proper subject of the poem is not so much the bird itself but the poet's aspiration towards a life of beauty away from the oppressing world - a beauty revealed to him for a moment by listening to the bird's song.

The dominant characteristic of the ode is its sensuousness. In other words he cared more sensations produced by the outward beauties of nature - its music, colour and scent than for thoughts. He loved to dwell upon the thrill of sensation and passion in life. Thus, the ode begins with a record of sensation which is purely physical. He has drunk in ~~the~~ the music of Nightingale's song, his whole

being is full of it. The effect is like of that of hemlock or some dull opiate. Quiet in the manner of a sensuous poet. heats with the intoxicating power of wine. It must be cooled in a celler for long time and must have poetic association with the places like Italy or Provence where they are manufactured. The richness of sensation is described with a voluptuous enthusiasm. But it is only a pessimistic phase. The poet rejects the idea of wine and would depend on his imaginative power to fade away and dissolve in the land of romance and beauty that the song of the bird typifies. Imagination makes him forgetful of the miseries of life and thrills him with joy even though the joy has tinge of sadness.

Thus Keats was a life-long quester of beauty. Initially responding to the world of the sensuous, Keats like Shelley, aspires for the spiritual. The description of the colourful wine, power of the nightingale with its play of light and shade and the sweet-smelling flowers reveals Keats' love for sensuous

beauty. The poet's imagination transports the timeless song into a voice of romance and beauty — a voice that is deathless in a world where beauty ~~per~~ perishes and romances fleets.

Keats is enchantingly and abundantly sensuous. He wishes to 'leave the world unseen' and 'fade away into the forest dim'. Even the sensualist would taste wine 'cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth' and would see the beaker 'with beaded bubbles winking at the brim' and 'purple-stained mouth' on the 'viewless wings of Poesy', the poet heard the nightingale's 'singing from a place of 'verdurous gloomes' — a place of 'beechen green' and 'shadows numberless.' Though the poet fails to see the flowers in the darkness of night, he could guess each of them by its peculiar fragrance — the hawthorn, the eglantine, and the musk rose. Other elements of Keats poetry of the ode illustrates are Keats love of nature, love of romantic and

Hellenism. A romantic is an escapist and Keats escapes from the sordid realities of life to the dreamland of romance. But excess is balanced by restraint and the poem ends on a note of reality. Romance escapes and evaporates, and the poet ultimately accepts the tragedy of life. He bids farewell to fancy —

" Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf! "

So, as a conscious artist, Keats always comes back to his sole-self.

On its artistic side the poem has some very remarkable quality. According to Matthew Arnold, the poem is almost Shakespearean on its beauty. Expressions like verdurous gloom, embalmed darkness, melodious plot, beechen green etc are beauties style. Again Keats is preeminently a poet of odes, as Shelley is that of lyrics. He has written a good number of odes, some of which have reached the high water mark of excellence and have been regarded as the noblest

achievements of English verse. His ode to a Nightingale, ode to Autumn, ode on Melancholy as well as known. Ode to a Nightingale is one of the noblest achievements of the genius of Keats.

"That Keats was with Shakespeare," in the words of Prof. Murray, and he was a Greek. Keats' Hellenism consists in the delight of the classical myths and legends. In Ode to a Nightingale, there are many classical references like 'Lethé', 'Dryad', 'Flora', 'Queen Moon', 'Hippocrene' and Bacchus. His Hellenism also manifests itself in the classical discipline of his style.

As the song of the nightingale is the voice of eternity, it transcends the bounds of time and space —

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!"

As a meditative ode, the poem also contains the reflection that death means denial of sensory experience. Thus,

though the poet is sensuous, his sensuousness is touched with the "sad music of humanity." Lastly the rhythmic quality of the verse with the skilful arrangement of rhymes contribute to the melody of the poem.

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