

“Ode to a Nightingale”: A Critical Appreciation

‘Ode to a Nightingale’ moves round three main characters — the poet, the nightingale, and the physical world of Nature. More specifically the drama of the poem concerns itself with the changing relationship of the poet and the nightingale, with the values they stand for, and the attempt at the resolution of the discords. The ideal proposed in the poem is the attainment of the vision of Beauty as Truth, and the nightingale is the symbol of self-annihilation, the means of this attainment. The nightingale is free of the principle of life whereas the poet is subject to change and decay, which are inherent in the processes of human living. The Nightingale may, therefore, be equated with the soul and the poet with the body, which is caught up in the meshes of death and existence beyond life. However, the last stanza constitutes a kind of anticlimax. From the enlarged vision of the ‘emperor and the clown’ we are thrown back to the citadel-like self of the poet, which reflects an inconsistency rather than reveals a resolution of discords.

The poem starts off by explaining how the narrator is heart-broken and is thinking about options to kill the sensation. He is considering hemlock, a poisonous drink made from the herb, and drinking from the Lethe River, a river in Hades that souls soon-to-be reincarnated drank from to forget their past lives. By choosing the latter of the two, the narrator would have to kill himself, neither of which seems enticing. Then the narrator hears the music of a nightingale and like a drug itself, dulls his senses into his own special world with the bird. He then uses synesthesia, "In some melodious plot / Of beechen green," to combine sound and sight. Normally a beechen green would not be described as "melodious," but Keats does this to let the reader know they are heading into a dream. By combining the two senses, the reader is made aware of the connection between the dream and reality.

The second stanza presents a plea for release from his pain by means of finely aged wine. By drinking "a beaker full of the warm South," he hopes that it will allow him to escape from his world into the forest realm of the nightingale. Here, Keats' use of synesthesia is the narrator tasting a visual, "Flora and the country green;" an activity, "Dance;" a sound, "Provençal song;" and a mood, "mirth." Also a visual, "sunburnt" is combined with an emotional state, "mirth." Once the beaker is mentioned, there is something to taste, but is instead replaced with a temperature, "warm;" and area, "South." By combining senses that otherwise would not be united, the reader is drawn into the implication that the narrator is still in a daydream, slowly drifting away from reality.

The third stanza is a reflection of Keats' experience with disease and disappointment. The narrator wants to "Fade far away and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known." He assumes the nightingale has never encountered "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" of life and he wants very much to be naïve and invincible like the bird.

The fourth stanza begins with the cry "Away!" The narrator says he will "not [be] charioted by Bacchus," the god of wine. He rejects wine and prefers to travel by means of the imagination on the "wings of Poesy." He is now dreaming that it's nighttime and he's with the nightingale in the sky, but he cannot see any light or feel anything. As he starts to realize that in giving up suffering, he is also slowly giving up his physical senses. The narrator recognizes the lack of light, or lack of vision, and immediately mentions the breeze being blown. He's combined these senses to describe the light trickling through the leaves of the nightingale's tree being moved by the wind. The reader can see that by unifying the senses of sight and touch, the narrator is still making the connection between the dream state and reality.

In stanza five, he has lost all of his senses and everything seems foreign to him. He lets his imagination tell him what surrounds him, when in fact it may not. Because his senses are useless, he has to rely on his brain for memories and imagination to assume certain flowers and trees are around him. I think the first line of this stanza, "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet," is also a way of talking about his sadness and admitting that because of his current state of depression, he can't see the finer things, or flowers, in his life. In the second line of the stanza he mentions, "soft incense hang[ing] upon the boughs." Here he combines touch, "soft;" with smell, "incense." Usually, the purpose of incense is to emit a desirable scent, but the narrator combines this with a feeling to show how the dream and reality are being connected.

In the sixth stanza, the narrator is still longing for an "easeful death." The poet has longed for death before, wanting it to take his "quiet breath," but he starts to think now would be an opportune time to die without any pain, listening to a melodic nightingale sing. Having reached this point in the dream, he soon realizes that his death would be in vain. His death would not be release from pain; it would mean non-existence the inability to hear the nightingale's music that created his "ecstasy."

The seventh stanza is the narrator bringing himself back to the reality of life. The nightingale seems to live eternally because its song is the same now as it was in earlier days.

Keats moves from the awareness of his own mortality in the preceding stanza to the perception of the bird's immortality in this stanza. But the narrator makes a mistake in claiming the bird is immortal, because it is in fact not—it is the music that will live on forever. The last word of stanza seven, "forlorn," is repeated as the first word in stanza eight. This ties the dream to reality for the reader also, because it is as if something is calling him back to reality from his dream.

In the final stanza, "Forlorn!" is ringing him back "like a bell." He is starting to realize that he cannot exist in both worlds and enjoy both of their finer qualities. He wants to die and escape from his pain, but if he does so he cannot hear the music of his nightingale. He's torn between the two existences. Now that the nightingale's song fades away, the narrator's escape is over and it leaves him wondering, "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?" It is as if he were questioning the validity of the experience, not knowing whether to trust his instincts. Despite his uncertainty, he slowly discovered that there does not have to be a distinction between a dream and reality.

Throughout the narrator's journey, he used the nightingale to figure out what he did and did not want with his life. In a way, he convinced himself to reject suicide as a way out of his problems. If he had not, he would not be able to enjoy everything life has to offer. He realized he should be able to enjoy the niceties in life without the use of wine, drugs or even dreaming, which is why I think he stopped using the synesthetic imagery toward the end of his journey. It had served its purpose in his confused beginning but he did not feel the need to make the connection for the reader between both realms in the end because he had come to clarification.