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Poetry Analysis: "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats

"Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats was written May of 1819; It was written shortly after tuberculosis took his brother and mother (Garvey 17-18). The poem itself is very powerful in form and expression. The ode was written in eight stanzas, has an iambic rhyme scheme and pentameter lines. The poem has a regular form and allows Keats to freely express his thoughts while listening to the nightingale. The speaker is sharing with his readers an experience he is going through rather than a memory he is recollecting. This experience is not entirely clear, but this shows what is he is thinking while he is listening to the nightingale. He brings up three main points in the ode: an evaluation of his life, his wish for death, and the power of imagination.

Keats sat for two to three hours and wrote under a plum tree, while listening to the sound of the nightingale nesting above him; Stephen Greenblatt notes, "Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song...he had some scraps of paper...contain[ing] his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale" (492). This ode is being written during the singing of the nightingale and how it made Keats feel in the moment. This being an ode, explains Keats' attention to detail and his powerful feelings and emotions at the time. The best way to explain an ode would simply be a lyrical poem and it is about praising something and describing its beauty. An ode is not encountered often and it is a very important part of poetry because it has emotion, analysis, and detail of something the poet/speaker is discussing. Keats is very known for his many odes and the "Ode to a Nightingale " is one of his most popular.

In the ode, stanzas one through four, the speaker evaluates his life and how life is a world is frustrating and unbearable. He talks about death many times throughout the poem. The nightingales song brings him joy momentarily but soon-after, is replaced by a strong feeling of lethargy and fatigue; which in turn, is replaced by the thought that life is not only painful but intolerable. He discusses the beauty of nature surrounding him but then speaks of death. In the second stanza Keats writes, “O for a beaker full of the warm South,/ With beaded bubbles winking at the brim;/...That I might drink, and leave the world unseen” (lines 15-19). He speaks of something positive and enjoyable but then turns dark. The singing of the nightingale has made him more unhappy about his life. He wants something more than life maybe something beyond it. This thought leads the speaker to this want to escape from life, not by means of alcohol, but through imagination.

Keats continues to his second point in stanzas five and six, where he wishes that he might die and be done with life altogether, saying he could die as easily as sleeping. He clearly says in the sixth stanza, “I have been half in love with easeful Death” (Keats, line 52). His mental state with death is interesting because he seems to have accepted death from the way he writes his ode. Keats’ life had been very difficult for some time before he wrote “Ode to a Nightingale.” His family life was shattered when his brother, Thom, died from tuberculosis. Then, his second volume of poetry was harshly criticized and reviewed. He did not have a job that paid, since he abandoned his medical studies to be a doctor. Therefore, he was in debt and could not marry the love of his life Fanny Brawne. Soon-after, just like his brother, Keats became ill and died in Italy from tuberculosis (Garvey 76). Thus, the death wish in the ode could be a personal feeling and thought of his troubles and frustrations in life. Keats wrote, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die,/ To cease upon the midnight with no pain,” life has become so difficult that it forced this

piece out of him (lines 55-56). Keats expressed a desire for “easeful Death” more than one time throughout the ode (line 52). The wish for death in the ode is a constant and recurrent feeling towards his life that was not the greatest.

Lastly, Keats speaks of his final thought in the ode which is the power of imagination seen throughout the poem. In the ode, he rejects wine/alcohol for poetry, the product of imagination, as a means of determining his existence with the happy singing of the nightingale. All of a sudden, he is pushed back into reality remembering the life that he is living. That “fancy cannot cheat as well/ As she is fam’d to do,” he admits in his last stanza (Keats, line 73-74). It sounds like he is saying that imagination is not all-powerful as he thought it was. It can only give a temporary escape from the world around us. He also uses signs of immortality when talking about the nightingale in the seventh stanza saying, “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird,” referring to the nightingale as a symbol of poetry and how poetry will never die (Keats, line 61). He adds a sense of strong power in the second stanza where he associates wine “With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,” (line 17) with sunny France and the “sunburnt mirth” (line 14) of the harvesters, where he also connects Ruth in the seventh stanza homesick, “amid the alien corn” (line 67). The ode is so rich and powerful in meaning when analyzed and really shows Keats’ amazing contribution to the different forms of poetry.

The speaker talks of the nightingale as a symbol of immortality but also as a symbol of poetry. He refers to it as a symbol of poetry by calling the nightingale a, “immortal Bird” (line 61) and how poetry is immortal and something that will not be forgotten and will never die. He confirms this in line 62 saying, “No hungry generations tread thee down,” almost saying that the many generations to come can not get rid of the beauty that poetry brings. The overall purpose of the poem is to show the readers, not only the beauty of this world he sees, but to pay attention to

the smaller things in life and love poetry and its immortal beauty. The ode can also be interpreted to Keats' personal life as well, because it can relate to his constant flow of imagination, his subconscious, his love for poetry, and his inevitable end to the illness that killed the rest of his family. Personally, John Keats has been my favorite poet to this day. He has shown me the true beauty of poetry and has moved me in ways that other poets have not. His work has truly shown the raw emotions that most poets do not explain as easily and openly as Keats does.

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