

Keats' Idea of the Enjoyment of Beauty/Conflict between Transience and Eternity, Imagination and Reality, Joy and Pain in *Ode to a Nightingale*

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The *Ode to a Nightingale* shows Keats at the highest of his romantic nympholepsy and sensuous enjoyment of beauty as a panacea for his thorns of life and as a foil to this material sickening world. Yet, one can trace a curious dichotomy in the very nature of the poem as well as the poet himself. Whereas the Nightingale's rapture beckons him towards a world free of fitful fevers of life, the very song also benumbs his senses; a synaesthetic enjoyment of beauty of the natural surroundings gives him imaginative relief, but it fails to erase the death-wish; though art is permanent, it is no match for the real transient life; and ultimately, imagination proves 'a deceiving elf' clashing with the poet's sense of reality.

Shelley said, 'I fall upon the thrones of life! I bleed!' (*Ode to the West Wind*), and Keats' thrones are no less piercing than Shelley's: his age are thorns of surroundings. The living world is 'where men sit and hear each other groan'. The spectacle of the 'pale, and spectre-thin' youth on the brink of death must certainly have originated in the poet's witnessing of the death of his brother Tom from consumption. Keats possesses an almost Hamlet-like ability of generalisation with which he views the 'weariness, the fever, and the

fret' of the world, the transience of Beauty in women's lustrous eyes and finally the evanescence of Love.

It is thus as a contrast to this death-in-life that Keats resorts to the beatific world of the nightingale. In fact, the nightingale is here no ordinary bird, but rather a symbol of the poet's idyllic and ideal world of permanence, the 'unbodied joy' like Shelley's skylark and the abstract 'Fair attitude' like Keats' own Grecian Urn. Its song is time-tested as it was heard both in biblical times by Ruth providing solace to her homesick heart and in the time of the medieval legends where it heralded freedom and relief to the captivated heroine in some remote island. The characteristic 'full-throated ease', its 'pouring forth [its] soul' and 'ecstasy' also stand in stark contrast to the choked milieu of the poet.

However, the pleasure provided by this symbol of relief and happiness is so intense that it soon turns into an ache, 'a drowsy numbness', a condition like that given by hemlock or a 'dull opiate'. All Keats' joys are Janus-faced, looking two ways. Yet, to perpetuate the enjoyment of its song Keats resorts to different modes of escape from his reality. The intoxication of the wine he enjoys synaesthetically. The wine should enrich the senses with sights and sounds of the festivities of Flora and the country green and should possess the warmth of the sun. The beaker should be rimmed with the purple beads of the red wine evoking the luscious beauty of a woman with red lips and with pearl beads round her neck.

The 'viewless wings of Poesy' takes the poet to the acme of his sensuous enjoyment of the beauty of the warm evening, to a kind of sensuous Paradise. The evening is felt through the tactile and olfactory senses: the darkness is 'tender' and 'embalmed'; in the gloom the flowers and spring ambience are felt through all the senses: 'soft incense', 'musk-rose' and 'sweet' (olfactory). 'White hawthorn' and blue 'violets' (visual) 'murmurous haunt

of flies' (auditory), 'dewy wine' (gustatory) and 'Summer eves' (tactile). But this sensuous Paradise is soon discarded as inadequate. His subconscious desire for death which from the beginning of the poem ran undercurrent now expresses itself in words of rapture. The river Lethe, the 'deep-delved earth', 'embalmed darkness', requiem and 'sod' weave the stanzas of the poem with the thread of death-wish. But just now at the height of enjoying the nightingale's song 'seems it rich to die,/ To cease upon the midnight with no pain'. But Keats, who once said 'A thing of beauty is joy forever' (*Endymion*) does not in the case of death, want to be deprived of the perpetual song of the nightingale: 'Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain'. Death, therefore, wins half his love, the other half reserved for the colours and rhythms of life.

The word 'forlorn' thus shocks him into realising that the nightingale's world fails to provide him the rhythms and colours of life which, though, is full of thorns. The world of nightingale reached through Imagination is a 'deceiving elf' just as the bright star is called the 'lone splendour'. The nightingale's world is an ivory tower, distant from the plain of reality. It allures and then leads nowhere. The conclusion of the poem thus shows Keats confused over the contraries whether 'Was it a vision or a waking dream?' The poet travels a trajectory and comes back to his self with the fading away of the bird's song. The *Ode* thus ends with the poet's exquisite awareness of the existence of joy and melancholy, pleasure and pain, and permanent art and transient life, which cohabit as inseparable elements of human experience.

