

Tagore, Proma. "Keats in an Age of Consumption: the 'Ode to a Nightingale.'" Keats-Shelley Journal 49 (2000) 67-84

Tagore proposes it is the metaphor of illness, specifically tuberculosis, which allows Keats to express most powerfully his self awareness of the body as both a thing and a being.

The creative process of writing becomes for the poet a corporeal event and the metaphor of illness a means through which he inscribes the body. The most explicit reference to the diseased body is found in stanza three, where Keats describes a world of "weariness," "fever," and "fret" (line 23). In addition, the constant fading or dissolving of the speaker into the dim forest testifies to the consumption of the body through illness.

Furthermore, this metaphor of illness allows the poet to conceptualize his body simultaneously as both a subject and an object. Throughout the ode, the speaker experiences a shutting down of the senses accompanied by a heightened sensibility. At one moment the human body becomes completely disassociated from the self as merely a string of signs and symptoms; however, in the next moment, it commences questioning of self regarding the significance of its disease. Therefore, on the one hand, Keats has become violently disengaged from the external environment revealing an objectified body. On the other hand, however, his strong feelings of anguish and a constant swing from euphoria to despair marks an intensely subjective experience.

Keats's history with tuberculosis is a well-known and documented fact. As an illness, tuberculosis was thought to devour the body and was therefore the ultimate metaphor for consumption.

Olshansky, David. "A Comparative Analysis of Sensation and Reflection Within John Keats's Ode to a Nightingale." Keats-Shelley Review 17 (2003): 27-33.

The relationship between sensation and reflection while observing their impact upon Keats's journey with the nightingale is examined in this article.

Sensation is the direct image and perception imported into the mind immediately after contact with an object. On the other hand, reflection describes the mind's processing of the contact with that object through a fusion of remembered elements of previous sensory experiences. Therefore, although sensation and reflection are distinctly different, they are at the same time uniquely linked.

Also central to this analysis is Keats's use of synesthesia, which relates to the senses, but is not part of sensation itself as it is formed when reflection combines the senses. So, while synesthesia contains sensory elements, it is a product of the imagination. In the context of this poem, synesthesia demonstrates the power of reflection, or the imagination.

The nightingale's song itself represents the sensory encounter that both connects Keats to reality, but enables him to temporarily escape it. The intense and ardent song of the nightingale captures sensation, but it is reflection that turns the sensual aspect of the song into the escape. Through the poet's imaginative reverie, the reader is able to share in a journey so full of sensory details that the real world is entirely, momentarily, forgotten. Keats realizes that although reflection can create this dream-like world, ultimately it is sensation that links the mind back to the material world, and thus the trance-like affect of the imagination fades. The poet and his reader are left with a palpable awareness of the dichotomy between the real world and one's imagination.

This article focuses on the ambiguity of the closing line of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" – "Do I wake or sleep?" It discusses the challenge presented to the reader in deciphering the uncertainty surrounding Keats's struggle between disturbing wakeful thought and a drowsy dream-like state.

Attention is drawn to the first stanza wherein the poet complains of an aching heart and a "drowsy numbness" that "pains [his] sense" as though sedated by an "opiate" (lines 1-3). His word choice ("pains" and "aches") implies awareness, yet the context is one of oblivion. Furthermore, while the nightingale's happiness overflows, the poet experiences this aching dullness.

Analysis of the relationship between the poet and the nightingale aids to interpret these contrarities. Stanza three describes the poet's reality of a weary and fretful existence. In contrast, however, is the fancy of the nightingale's world in which the poet "cannot see" and thus embarks on a sensuous journey using his imagination (line 41). Despite an attempt to reconcile this contrast through his imagination, Keats is unable, and so the distance between the nightingale's bliss and his insipid reality grows. The description of the nightingale as immortal in stanza seven serves to reinforce the separation of bird and poet.

A final point of interest is the poem's time scheme and accompanying haziness, which progresses from an evening of "shadows numberless" to "embalmed darkness," and lastly to midnight (lines 9,43). In the final stanza, however, gone is the cloud of somnolence, replaced by clarity as the numbness of senses is overcome. Keats is "toll[ed]...back from ...the fancy," and the poet watches as the bird is "buried deep/ In the next valley" and listens as the "plaintive anthem fades" – he can see and hear (lines 72-28). As he bids farewell to the nightingale, the vagaries are clear, for Keats is awake, not dreaming.

Honoring Keats's sensuous approach to the world around him, "Ode to a Nightingale" also reveals his struggle with realism. The poet's imaginative reverie creates for the reader a palpable experience so full of sensory detail that the real world is entirely forgotten. However, the escape is momentary, for Keats recognizes that although his imagination temporarily grants this break from reality, in truth, such idealization cannot coexist with the surrounding pragmatism. Therefore, the ode exposes a struggle as Keats fights between the practicality of the real world and the blissful respite crafted by his vivid imagination.

The poem's aesthetic imagery and "seamless union of senses" draws its reader into a "mystical world opposing reality" (Olshansky 27). Smell, touch, taste, and auditory senses are activated. However, in an attempt to avert his eyes from "the weariness, the fever, and the fret," Keats endeavors to diminish a sense of sight throughout the ode (3.23). Emphasis is placed upon alternative sensations, all of which enhance the imaginative journey of both poet and reader. Stanza five masterfully employs synesthesia despite a shutting off of sight. The redolent fragrances of "soft incense" and the "coming musk rose" trigger the sense of smell (42,49). Evoking textures of the "grass" and the "thicket," Keats appeals to a sense of touch (45). Taste is also stimulated through reference to the "fruit-tree wild" and to "dewy wine" (45,49). Finally, his description of the hum of a "murmurous haunt of flies" (50) engages the auditory sense (Tagore 76). This concomitant sensation exemplifies Keats's rich fusion of the senses to intensify a breaking away from troublesome reality and an ushering in of the idyllic world of his imagination.

Initially Keats discloses his need for an escape by placing attention upon sedation as a means to anesthetize the pain caused by his environment. In the first stanza, images of "hemlock," "opiate," as well as a reference to the river "Lethe" convey the poet's response to his

existence in the material world (2-4). Disturbing awareness of life's "groan" is the cause of his uneasiness and his desire to rid himself of agitated sensation and emotion (3.24). To quiet the trepidation, Keats's figurative solution is to drink of waters inducing forgetfulness or to partake of sedatives, consequently numbing his consciousness. Yet, this "soporific experience of losing sensation is paradoxically accompanied by [the] wrenching heart ache" of the opening line of the ode (Tagore 82). However, immediately following these sentiments, the nightingale is addressed for the first time as being "too happy in thine happiness" (1.6). Keats recognizes an "excess of sensuous pleasure in the [nightingale]" and begins to connect with the bird (Little 44). The nightingale engages Keats completely, and he takes delight and satisfaction in an intensified state of sensation. Hence, while the sedatives represent liberation through dulling of senses, the nightingale, the escape of Keats's choice, symbolizes deliverance through heightening of sensation.

Therefore, as an emblem for Keats's escape from troublesome surroundings, the symbol of the nightingale is integral to the ode, and twofold in its suggestiveness. At the outset, the nightingale's song permits Keats's estrangement from reality; however, it later reinforces a dichotomy between the poet's imaginative bliss and his aching actuality. Keats is drawn to the nightingale, for it has never known his wearisome world. The second stanza reveals a "growing sympathy and identification with the bird" (Little 41) furthered by a desire to "leave the world unseen" and "fade away" with the nightingale (19,20). The appeal of the nightingale's song allows the poet to ignore reality as he strives to suspend the vexation. Unfortunately, however, this moment of dissolution is short-lived, for in the next stanza Keats discusses his "bitter personal experience" – revealing a substantial distance between poet and bird (Little 45). The seventh stanza completes their separation as Keats emphasizes the expanse between himself and

the nightingale by contrasting the “immortal Bird” to the trodden affairs of human life (61). The nightingale is immortal, but cannot bestow immortality (Little 49). Therefore, although the nightingale with its song represents a temporary escape into a state of worry-free delight, it also becomes a stinging reminder of Keats’s insipid reality.

The individual stanzas of the poem reinforce Keats’s struggle by their constant vacillation between exhilarating euphoria and despair. Specifically, stanzas three and four emphasize this fluctuation in the poet’s mood. In stanza three, Keats is exposed to wearisome troubles so that “think[ing] [itself] is...full of sorrow” (23,27). Demoralized by this reality, Keats writes the entire stanza depicting the miseries of the material world – the world he yearns to escape. In contrast, as a reaction to suffering and burden of thought, he approaches near hysteria in stanza four as he searches for a release (Little 46). The poet’s emotional declaration, “Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,” confirms his entering the haven of the nightingale, submitting to the still and peaceful oblivion of the imagination (4.31).

Although Keats is whole-hearted in his submission to the liberating nightingale, relying on it to activate his imagination, and thus conceding to an enchanted reprieve, the break from reality is fleeting. The final stanza implies rationality of poet. “Forlorn! the very word” has the connotation of a bell’s clarity (8.71). He can no longer deny that the attempt to escape the weary world is hopeless. “The earlier ‘Away! Away!’ becomes ‘Adieu! Adieu!’ as Keats recognizes “that all has been deception by the ‘deceiving elf’ of fancy” (Little 49). The imaginative journey has ultimately brought the poet to this point of lucidity. He now distinguishes paradisaic imagination from somber reality.

An inherent struggle with realism permeates this poem. As Keats grapples with grave and melancholic surroundings, he encounters the nightingale. This cathartic creature permits him

temporary “leave [from] the world unseen” (2.19). By connecting with the nightingale, Keats’s imagination “generate[s] a dream-like world”— a world in which sensation reaches the pinnacle of ecstasy (Olshansky 33). For a moment, Keats turns away from “the weariness, the fever, and the fret” (3.23). Nevertheless, the poet must accept that his sensuous reverie has drawn to an inevitable end. The ode’s conclusion communicates an element of hopelessness in accepting the reality of this world. Despite the intense passion and zeal with which Keats writes of his imaginative journey, “a sense of real things comes doubly strong” (Keats 1798). “Ode to a Nightingale” is the record of a poet’s fight against realism.

Works Cited

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