



Ode to a Nightingale: The Applause, Delight, and Wonder of English Literature

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Abstract: The present paper “Ode to a Nightingale: The Applause, Delight, and Wonder of English Literature” deals with the study of Keats’ mammoth contribution to English poetry. Reflecting on the choosing of words, style, and technique the paper proves his mastery in poetry. Thus a detailed study reveals interesting features of the ode contributed to English poetry. The focus has been on how the poet has managed to achieve immaculateness.

The present study, undertaken in the manner presented in this work, will not only provide the reader with insights into the theme of the ode, but also encourage him/her to think afresh about the art of the composing that made him the best and distinguished above the rest of romantic poets.

Keywords: Hellenism, nightingale, romantic, sensuousness, style.

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INTRODUCTION

The “Ode to a Nightingale” was written by John Keats, the supremo of the trio of second generation of romantic poets in 1819 and was published in 1820. The “Ode to a Nightingale” is generally admired for its rich and slow moving stanza form and for its expressions of what are considered to be emotions proper to romantic poetry. Its true merits are of a higher kind, i. e. treating the nightingale’s song as a symbol of the timeless, escaping from the world of change and decay through imagination, proving the art and death as the foster child of time and change, establishing relationship between art, death and life and accepting the reality though sadder but wiser. Briefly, the poem is a meditation on the immortal beauty of the nightingale’s song and sadness of the observer, who must accept sorrow and mortality in the end. “It is a finer and more vital thing than appreciation in terms of ‘art for art’s sake [1]”, as F R Leavis comments.

Source: Keats’s friend Charles Brown accounts the origin of the ode thus “In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house,

(Wentworth Place, Hampstead, where Keats was then living with Brown.) Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song, and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass-plot under a plum tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived that he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. These ‘scraps’, in reality two half sheets, bore the ode [2].”

Development of the thoughts: The poet’s heart “aches” not due to “envy” of the “happy” lot of the “Dryad of the trees” but being a party in the happiness of nightingale who “In some melodious plot/ Of beechen green” pours her “ full-throated ease”. Being taken, “a draught of vintage” that has been cooled “in the deep delved earth” and has a taste of “Flora, Provencal song, (and) sun burnt mirth” (Brackets are mine) the poet wants to escape to the world of the forest. He longs to disappear from that world “Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, /Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow” where mundane life is full of “The weariness, the fever and the fret” moreover where many a party is palsy shaken “last gray heirs” and

"spectre-thin" youth. By discarding the "beaker full of the warm South" wine, the poet, transports himself in "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" by the help of "viewless wings of Poesy." In the "mid-May's embalmed darkness" the poet inhales the exhaled sweet fragrance of flowers and luxuriates "The murmurous haunt of flies." In such a melodious surrounding where the Nightingale is "pouring forth" her "Soul" in the lap of nature the poet is in full love "with easeful Death". The bird is immortalized because "No hungry generations tread down" her and the "self same song" was heard by "Ruth amid alien corn" where "the sad heart of Ruth" got relaxed by the bird's song when "She stood in tears". The fancy ridden poet comes back to real life because the "deceiving elf" "cannot cheat so well", and he has to lead the life that is allotted to him whether it may be a tale of tears or might be a bed of roses.

Sensuousness: The term sensuousness implies that poetry is related not to any philosophical thought but chiefly to the task of giving pleasure to the senses. Keats is a sensuous poet par excellence with his passion for crushing the grapes of language on his palate, capability to speak the language of eyes, faculty to distinguish the flowers in deep darkness, ability to hear the voice of falling a single petal on the turf and luxuriating the hot and cold gushes of wind. Sensuousness is paramount bias of Keats's genius for which he himself cries "O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts!"^[3] Now let us focus out this enchanting quality in the poem.

Sense of sight: The reader feasts his eyes "on a beaker" "full of the blushful Hippocrene" on which "beaded bubbles (are) winking at the brim" (Brackets are mine) and gets the poet with "purple stained mouth". He also takes a glimpse of human society that is on the path to deteriorating.

"Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale and spectre-thin and
dies,"

Sense of taste: The poet has tasted the juice of "hemlock". He has taken too much "opiate" and assumes himself to be "dull". Moreover he is tempted to taste that wine which "hath been cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth" and that contains the taste of "Flora", gives power to people to continue their "Provençal song" that they have become "sunburnt mirth!" (People are so mirth in dancing and singing that they even don't know that the Sun rays are burning and blackening them)

Sense of hearing: The poet can hear the "groan" of palsy shaken old men and of pale, spectre-thin, leaden-eyed youth. He can luxuriate "the

murmurous haunt of flies" and what he finds in following lines –

"Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery land forlorn."

Sense of smelling: In the "embalmed darkness" the poet can "guess each sweet" not by the power of eyes, but by the power of nose e.g. white hawthorn, eglantine, violets, musk rose etc. In darkness the poet distinguishes the flowers by name with the sense of smelling so it is called "embalmed darkness".

Sense of touch: The poet can feel the touch of the gushes of fresh wind that blows "Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways." Thus we are fully agreed with what has been said "No one can question the eminence in Keats's poetry of the quality of sensuousness. Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous [4]."

Hellenism: The ancient Greeks called their country Hellas and themselves Hellenes. Graecia was a name given by the Romans to Hellas. Hellenism is a derivative from Hellas and has been a familiar word in literary criticism, very frequently used in connection with Milton, Keats and Swinburne. Like Shakespeare, Keats knows "little Latin and less Greek [5]." but the knowledge of Greek he gained from Chapman's translations, and was greatly influenced with Greek art and culture. Greekness, the inborn temperamental of his mind reflects so richly in his poetry that he seems to be the "foster-child" of Greek culture and art as Shelley declared "Keats was a Greek[6]." The very inspiration for the source of the ode "Ode to a Nightingale" is the Nightingale that is connected with Greek myth of Philomela, Procne and Tereus. He addresses the Nightingale as "light-winged Dryad of the trees" that focuses on the Goddess in Greek mythology. Such references as "Flora", "Blushful Hippocrene", "Bacchus and pards", "Lethe", "Ruth" etc. leave the marks of Hellenism in the poem.

Grandeur of generality: Although, the ode was written in such a time when the poet was passing through the jerks and jolts of personal sorrows yet he has so fairly generalized these personal sorrows that these personal sorrows become the woes of men as soon as he utters and the readers get their eyes wet. It was written soon after the tragic death of his darling brother Tom, the poet himself was in the clutches of T.B., his passions for Fanny Brawne were also burning in the fire of frustration so one can find the picture of his brother Tom in the words, "Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin, and dies;", "the leaden-eyed despairs" may be about Keats himself, and "Where beauty cannot keep her Lustrous eyes," may be about Fanny

Brawne. But this saying is without proof and it must be borne in our mind that Keats in the third stanza is never personal in his presentation and his style is that of Shakespeare ie the grandeur of generality as Matthew Arnold says, "He is with Shakespeare [7]." His poetry is an arch dome made from personal woes but coloured with generalization.

A romantic proper poem: The ode is a lovely piece of romantic poetry. It is spontaneous as he himself said, "That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it has better not come at all [8]." By his faculty of imagination the atmosphere is created of hushed silence of midnight when the "queen-moon is on her throne cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;" yet the ode was composed in the morning as sounds the word "haply" in the stanza forth and the same time is suggested by his friend Charles Brown. From the very first line to the last line the ode is full of melancholic mood. But the mood of sadness that is striking keynote of all his odes cannot affect badly his root-quality; the disinterested love of beauty. The thrilling notes of Nightingale's song sooth the poet's pain. Thanks to such phrases as "full-throated ease", "purple stained mouth", "beaded bubbles winking at the brim", "Sunburnt mirth", "leaden-eyed despairs", "lustrous eyes", "embalmed darkness", "murmurous haunt", the reader is stirred and the crown of pictorial artist is tossed up on the head of Keats. Keats has been called the Turner of English landscape poetry of Nineteenth century. Poetry and plastic art merge and mingle together in the works of Keats. Such phrases as "charmed magic casements", "opening on the foam", "perilous sea", "faery lands forlorn" push the ode towards mysterious, supernatural and ethereal atmosphere. In poetry wisdom works between imagination and reality and the latter must prevail over the former. The poet wants to escape from the world of change and decay to the world of Nightingale, but in the last the poet though sadder but wiser comes back.

"To tell me back from thee to my sole self! ...
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?"

Versification: The poem contains eight stanzas of ten lines each. The diction is amazing and the words are sweet and sonorous. The rhyme scheme is ab ab cde cde. The measure is iambic pentameter.

"MY HEART aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,"

The eighth line of each stanza has only six iambic syllables, and it is used so because a certain variety is needed to prevent continual delight passing monotony.

"In some melodious plot"

The last line of the second stanza is an Alexandrine, and it is used so because poet's heart lingers towards beauty and its lingering motive has ample reason to be longer than any other in the poem.

"And with the fade away into the forest dim."

Thus we can say that the poem is a matchless ode as Robert Bridges writes, "I cannot name an English poem of the same length which contains so much beauty as this ode" and "Had Keats left us only his odes his rank among the poets would not be lower than it is, for they have stood apart in literature [9]." Middleton Murry says, "For sheer loveliness this poem is unsurpassed in the English language [10]." After going through the poem one cannot help believing David Daiches's remark, "indeed, Keats, not Spenser became for the later nineteenth century the poet's poet [11]."

A single word can earn or mar a poet's reputation. Words are like gravel for the poetic road that leads to the palace of wisdom. Poetic art is born of the right choice of words. The ignorance of the choice of words is not innocence but sin that only ruins one's corpus. When proper words prevail ambiguity flees away and he achieves immaculateness. He is the original master of the language used. By examining his diction, spirit of sadness, disinterested love of beauty, sheer music, sensuous painting, and Greekness, it seems that he has followed his own advice and has "load(ed) every rift of" his "subject with ore [12]". (Brackets are mine)

Be good at choosing of words, style, and technique is the end of his poetry. Keats inhales the colours of life and exhales verses. He looks upon fine words and phrases as a butterfly does for flowers. Very nicely he knows the poetic art and re-examines it with a true critic's skill. He chose, he reflected and he conquered at last so far as the style of poetry is concerned. Style and thought are two cardinal virtues of his poetry; the sinews of fame, as well as of eternity. The mind of the reader relishes the diction, the phrases, the idioms, the images and the figures of speech used in the ode. His odes set a new tone and stamp his creative excellence.

Notes: All the quotations from Ode to a Nightingale are quoted from Harold, Briggs (ed.) *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Keats*. New York: Modern Library 1951.

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