

ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

JOHN KEATS (1795-1821)

JOHN KEATS: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

The eldest son of a stable keeper, John Keats was born at Swan and Hoop, Finsbury Pavement, London in October, 1795 and lost his parents before he was fifteen years old. He was at first apprentice to a surgeon called Thomas Hammond and then pursued medical studies at St. Thomas's and Guy's Hospitals for about a year. Naturally, he found the line unsuitable for him and devoted all his time to writing poetry. Yet he earned an apothecary's license and even worked for a short time as a dresser at Guy's.

Meanwhile his first poetic composition, a sonnet called *On first looking at Chapman's Homer*, had been written. *Sleep and Poetry* and 'I stood tip-toe' followed soon. He also struck an intimate friendship with the poet Leigh Hunt. In 1817 Keats's first volume of poetry was published. By the end of that year he also wrote *Endymion* and some sonnets and made friends with Bailey, Dilke, Brown and Severn. In 1818 *Endymion* was published and severely criticized by Blackwood's Magazine. Depressed by that and more by the death of his youngest brother, Keats tried to find solace in love with Fanny Brawne. He wrote hurriedly an epical *Hyperion*, many wonderful verses like *The Eve of St Agnes* and *Lamia*, and the magnificent Odes which have made him immortal. The year 1818-19 was the golden year of Keats's brief life. Like his brother, whose death partly occasioned *Ode to a Nightingale*, he became a prey to tuberculosis and died at Rome early in 1821. His last composition was the revised version of the famous love sonnet *Bright Star*. English poetic literature suffered a set back at his tragic premature death.

FEATURES OF KEATS'S POETRY

Now recognized as one of the greatest poets of English literature, Keats's poetry is distinguished by some great qualities.

A. Sensuousness: Keats is the first major poet in the language, after Shakespeare, to have given the fullest possible sense impressions in a very memorable manner in his poetry. As Garrod says, the effectiveness of Keats's verse lies 'not in political thinking', but in the exercise of the five senses. An all-embracing sensuousness is the determining element of the distinctive individuality of Keats's genius. This sensuousness is also characterized by its universality of appeal and its power to transcend the senses.

The very intensity of Keats's sensuousness enables him to penetrate beyond the externals into the very essentials of things. This poetic quality pervades in all his creations, not only in

"Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell",

but also in

' My heart aches, and drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk..'

The senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste are at once active in the passage in *Ode to a Nightingale* beginning 'O for a draught of vintage that hath been' and ending 'And purple-stained mouth'. Keats's amazingly intense fascination for colour, light, shape and lustre makes the image of Lamia so unforgettable : 'a gordian shape of dazzling hue', 'vermillion-spotted, golden, green and blue', 'striped like a zebra, frackled like a pard/ Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson-barr'd'.

According to David Masson, Keats, with the help of intellect, feeling and experience, did advance from 'Infant Chamber' or 'Chamber of mere sensation' into the 'Chamber of Maiden Thought'. But his glorious sensuousness remains an asset of English poetry.

B. Hellenism: Keats was a passionate lover of Greek literature, mythology, sculpture and almost anything Greek. It has influenced his attitude to nature and life immensely. The temper of the soul with which he has looked on nature betrays all the simplicity, the same feeling of joy and worship wrought together, which a young Greek might have had before Socrates. In his world of poetry the sun is not a mere ball of fire, but Apollo himself burning in his car with ardour ; the moon is the sweet love of Endymion. Pan's sweet pipings are heard among the oaks and olives, along with choirs of fauns. Trees and brooks are full of dryads and naiads. The immortal knit relation with the mortal. This hellenism accounts for the charm of concrete beauty and mythical loveliness of his lyrics, narrative poems and odes alike.

C. Keats as a lover and worshipper of Beauty: A keen and passionate yearning for beauty was the most dominant note in the life as well as in the poetry of Keats. He was as sensitive to the beauty of art and literature as to that of life and nature. He 'looked upon the fine phrases like a lover' and when he first read Chapman's Homer he felt spell-bound.

' Like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken.'

All through his poetic career, from *Sleep and Poetry* to the second *Hyperion*, Keats sought and worshipped beauty. But the beauties of the moon, of women, of art, of mythology, of music, did not remain as separate impressions to him, he tried to see 'the principle of beauty in all things'. He wrote in a letter, 'The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.'

Keats's melancholy is also associated with his cult of beauty, beauty which he felt 'must die'. In *Ode to a Nightingale* one main reason for lament is that in earthly life 'Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes'. But he sought and was convinced of the permanence of the beauty of art. The belief that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' is true for the artist while he is concerned with creation and for the spectators engrossed in enjoying art. Keats is the first aesthete among English poets, the model of Rossetti and Walter Pater.

D. Keats's imagination: Keats's concern is with the imagination in a special sense and he is not far from Coleridge in his view of it. For him it does much more than imagining in the ordinary sense; it is an insight so fine that it sees what is concealed from most men and understands things in the full range and significance and character. Thus while delineating the picture of the sacrificial procession engraved on the Grecian Urn, he empathizes with the unseen forlorn town where the worshippers have come from:

'And little town, thy streets for evermore/will silent be...'

This leads to Keats's unique quality, termed by himself as 'Negative capability'. He explains it as the capability 'of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' It is far from passive indolence, it is rather an imaginative perception free from personal liking or prejudice, in order to feel and communicate artistic beauty as fully as possible. In imagination Keats could feel the chill of the owl and even of the stone busts in extreme winter *Eve of St. Agnes*, and could become a bird among birds and peck at grains with them.

E. Keats's magical phrases: In the use of beautiful imagery and felicitous phrases, Keats is among the finest practitioners of the art. In fact these cast a frequent magical spell on the readers and many of them are unforgettable. Lines like—'Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene/With beaded bubbles winking at the brim'; 'Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought/As doth eternity; Cold Pastoral'; and phrases like 'magic casement', 'elfin grotto', 'soft-fallen mask' 'strenuous tongue can burst joy's grape' are a few

of numerous Keatsean coinings that haunt lovers of poetry by their melody, loveliness and suggestiveness.

KEATS'S ODES: GENERAL ESTIMATE

Keats would have remained immortal as a poet if only he had written the six superb odes : *On Indolence*, *To Psyche*, *To Melancholy*, *To a Nightingale*, *On a Grecian Urn*, and *To Autumn*. Like all great poetry, his Odes reveal to us no striking novelty of thought. The emotions that pulse through them are as old as man's aspirations and man's aching heart. But nowhere in literature, save in some of Shakespeare's Sonnets, do these emotions affect us with the same haunting pathos, for nowhere else do they find such intensely imaginative and flawlessly artistic expression. In the opinion of Middleton Murry they are 'poems comparable to nothing in English literature save the works of Shakespeare's maturity.' Keats's personal experiences of hopelessness in love, agony in a brother's death and anticipation of sudden termination to his creative career, serve to inspire and colour the Odes.

The Odes of Keats combine in them the peculiar excellences of the form with absolute freedom from its characteristic drawbacks, such as stiffness of phraseology, over-elaboration of form, artificiality and rhetorical declamation, which detract from the poetic appeal of the Odes of Dryden, Gray, Collins, Wordsworth, Coleridge and even Shelley. They are, like traditional odes, always in the form of an address or invocation : exalted in style and more dignified in tone than simple lyrics. The evolution of thought in them is always measured and the poetic logic has its own consistency. Their structure is neither too sustained to fracture their unity, nor too slender to indicate their difference from the song proper. They are distinguished by their poignancy of feeling, their richly meditative texture, their splendour of imagery and their flawless workmanship. They are remarkable for their Hellenic clarity, their chiselled beauty, their inevitable poetic afflatus. They surprise us with their brooding sweetness, their long-drawn out melody, their fine excess and their glorious independence.

'In the Odes', says Selincourt, 'Keats has no master ; and their indefinable beauty is so direct and so distinctive an effluence of his soul that he has no disciple.' Keats has attempted no classical variety of the Ode, Pindaric or Horatian. His range as an odist is confined to that of a modern romantic ode, with preference for the stanzaic form of which he is the greatest master. His odes are not choric, but purely personal and subjective. They are the most characteristic, richest and the most harmonious expression of

the full current of his soul, his keen sense of beauty of Nature and the significance of Art and Mythology. They poetise his impassioned recognition of the fundamental mystery of Beauty, fleeting yet permanent, his love of romance, his all-embracing sensuousness, his profound sense of mutability of life and his almost Shakespearean receptivity and openness of mind.

TEXT

I

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk : 5
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness,—
 That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease. 10

II

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
 Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth,
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,
 Dance, and Provencal song, and sun-burnt mirth!
 O, for a beaker full of the warm South, 15
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
 And purple-stained mouth;
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim. 20

III

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret.
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes of few, sad, last grey hairs, 25
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs;
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow. 30

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. 70

VIII

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades 75
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades :
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep? 80

ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

As the immediate result of listening to the song of a nightingale the poet feels a heart-ache and then a dullness in the brain. It seems he is being drowned in a sort of narcotic sleep. But he is happy to share the happiness of the bird which sings a glad sweet song in a loud voice. He imagines it is a dryad singing in a green forest of beech trees in a happy summer night.

The thought of summer and joyous song leads to the evocation of the image of the 'sunburnt mirth' in a warm province of Southern France celebrated by people through song and dance and drinking of wine cooled in an underground cellar for years. The poet wants to taste this intoxicating liquor, pouring it in a container and watching its brimming bubbles before staining his lips with its purple colour. But his main intention is to forget the world of reality and fly away to the forest-world of the nightingale.

The third stanza draws a moving picture of the sufferings of men in this world, which prompt the poet's desire to escape from here to the ideal haven of the Nightingale where these are unknown. Everyone on earth is miserable and constantly complaining. Not only the old, but the young too are constantly wasting away. Frustration and despair is the lot of human beings and their beauty dies as soon its brief moment is over.

Sticking to his resolution to break away from earthly world, the poet changes his mode of flight. He decides not to take the route of intoxication, not to take the help of drunken fancy, but depend upon his power of imagination to carry him up to the nightingale. The imaginative flight takes him straight on to the branch of a tree thickly covered with leaves, right beside the singing bird. From the dark nook he fancies the moon to be shining like a queen surrounded by stars.

The fifth stanza is a wonderful record of how the olfactory sense of smell, in the absence of sight, evokes a complete information of flowers and fruits of summer. Judging by their fragrance, the poet identifies whatever has grown in the grasses, thickets and trees of that garden, whether it is hawthorn or eglantine or violet or musk-rose, or a ripe fruit. The total experience is enriched by the music of murmuring bees.

There is a jump of thought in stanza six. With apparent suddenness the poet brings in his desire for death. He confesses that he has a plan of a luxurious death, of just quietly and painlessly ceasing to breathe on a gentle night like this while listening to the song of the nightingale, which would serve as an ideal requiem.

From the thought of his own death and the allied thought of mortality, the poet turns to the contrast and asserts that the Nightingale is immortal and can never die. It sang in ancient times to kings and clowns and to Ruth and the captive princess of fairy tales, as it is singing to him now. Its unrestricted voice, in poet's imagination, easily ranged across perilous seas to faery lands forlorn to bring solace and comfort to suffering human hearts.

The very sound of the word 'forlorn' rouses the poet from his imagination and hurls him down to stark reality where he doubly feels his own forlorn state. The song fades as the nightingale flies away and is heard no more. The dazed poet wonders whether he is still in sleep and whether the whole experience was nothing but a reverie.

NOTES AND ANNOTATIONS

Stanza 1. My heart aches—the aching of heart signifies a pain in the chest in the literal sense; but poetically it suggests an emotional tightening where pain and pleasure are mixed together. **Drowsy numbness**—sleepiness and gradual loss of sensation; **Hemlock**—a poisonous plant; the poet imagines he has drunk the juice produced from it. A small quantity of it leads to deep sleep, a larger quantity produces death. Socrates died by taking a cup of Hemlock. **Dull opiate**—numbing opium preparation; **To the drains**—emptying the cup by sipping the whole content. **Lethewords had sunk**—Here is one of the many allusions to classical mythology in Keats. Lethe, in Greek mythology, is the river of forgetfulness flowing round hell. The souls of dead men forget their earthly memories when they cross this river. Keats means to say here that he is not only feeling sleepy, but also forgetting everything. **'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot**—the poet is personally extremely unhappy; so he might have been jealous of the bird's happiness. But he is forgetting his own personality

and completely submitting to the happy strain of the nightingale. **Light-winged**—swiftly flying; **Dryad**—another mythical creature, a wood-nymph which is supposed to flit about from tree to tree. **Melodious plot**—garden full of melody; it is an instance of Transferred Epithet, because the plot is not melodious, the song of the Nightingale is; **Beechen green**—full of green beech trees. **Summer**—associated with pleasant weathers and beauty of nature; **Full throated case**—singing spontaneously, loudly and enjoying and letting others enjoy as fully as possible.

Stanza 2. Draught of Vintage—gulp of wine; **O, for a draught of vintage**—a strong wish for a cup of special wine that can inspire him to imagine a beautiful world. **Cooled a long age**—wine is said to be tastier the older and the cooler it is. **Deep-delved earth**—kept in the deep underground cellar. **Tasting of Flora and the country green**—the wine into which has passed the flavour and smell of the teeming life of Nature in her grass and flowers. **Provençal song**—songs of Provence in Southern France, a district famous for producing wine from ripe grapes. **Sum-burnt mirth**—a merriment in a warm sunny weather. **Full of the warm South**—as if the wine is distilled out of the sunny warmth of the climate of Southern France and Italy. **The true, the blushful Hippocrene**—Hippocrene is one of the fountains of the Muses in Greek mythology, drinking the water of which makes one achieve poetic power. Keats wants to drink such wine which shall have the poetic efficacy of the Hippocrene, but at the same it should have the visual attractiveness of a reddish colour, like that of a blushing face. **Beaded bubbles winking at the brim**—the wine, poured in a glass, will produce the bubbling; each bubble of round, bead-like shape will float and twinkle about the rim of the glass; they give the impression of winking at the world outside the glass; it is a wonderfully vivid image of the effervescent moment, full of alliterative melody too. **Purple-stained mouth**—as imaginative jump to the next stage, showing the effect of drinking that wine, how it will leave the mark of its red stain on the mouth.

Stanza 3. Fade—vanish; **Dissolve**—melt, **Fever and fret**—constant haste and anxiety and sickness; **Groan**—let out cry of pain and pressure in an undertone; **Palsy**—old age; here it is personified as a feeble old man; **Spectre-thin**—emaciated and reduced to a fleshless skeleton; this is how Keats found his young brother Thomas in the last stage of consumption. **Where but to think is to be full of sorrow**—all serious thoughts in this world lead to despondence because of our inevitable sufferings and mortality. **Leaden-eyed despair**—a feeling of complete hopelessness which

asserts its power by producing a totally lack-lustre look in the eyes. Keats here presents a concrete image of personified despair with lead-like eye balls; **Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes**—the indication of beauty is in the bright eyes of young women and men, the brightness which dims too quickly; **New love pine at them beyond tomorrow**—love is transient, it is tired of one person in a day and yearns for a new partner.

Stanza 4. Away! away!—it is a recurring refrain, expressing the persistent strong desire to escape from this world; **Charioted**—conveyed, transported. **Bacchus and his pards**—in Classical mythology Bacchus is the god of wine and revelry and he is presented as riding a chariot drawn by leopards. **Not charioted by Bacchus**—the poet refuses to take the route of forgetfulness through intoxication of wine; **Viewless wings of poesy**—the inspiration of poetic imagination by virtue of which a man can fly anywhere, though the wings of imagination are invisible; **The dull brain**—dizzy and oppressed condition of the brain when it cannot function logically; **Perplexes and retards**—feels puzzled and unable to move forward. **Already with thee**—in imagination he feels he is beside the bird at once; **haply**—perhaps, because he is surrounded by the thick foliage of the tree and does not really know how the sky looks now; **The Queen Moon is on her throne**—a beautiful mythical image in which the Moon, imagined as the Queen of Heaven, sits on the throne of a white cloud. **Clustered around by all her starry fays**—the fairy-like small stars are surrounding the Queen Moon like her attendants; **Verdurous gloom**—a darkness created by excessive growth of leaves; **Winding mossy ways**—the wind makes its ways along the mossy branches of the trees, as it comes from outside and turns left and right, pushing the leaves to make room for its progress.

Stanza 5. at my feet—in the garden below the tree on top of which the poet fancies himself seated with the nightingale; **Soft**—mellow; **Incense**—combined fragrance of various flowers and fruits; **Embalmed darkness**—darkness spread like a soothing balm, obliterating stark glare of light; **Seasonable month**—the month of May which combines the fruitful capacity of spring and summer; **Thicket**—bush; **Pastoral eglantine**—sweet-brier creepers no often found in pastoral poetry; **Mid May's eldest child the coming musk-rose**—the musk rose is a kind of rose exuding musk-like scent; it blooms in the middle of May, so it is called mythically the eldest child of Mid-May; **Dewy-wine**—the rose is covered with the evening dew on the surface, and it is full of sweet juice within; **Murmurous haunt of flies**—the flowers with their fragrance attract swarms of buzzing

flies and the garden becomes haunted by these singers; the very line seems to produce a verbal echo of the murmur the bees create.

Note: the whole stanza is a unique example of Keats's wonderful sensuousness and specially of the demonstration of the sense of smell.

Stanza 6. Darkling—staying in the dark; **Listen**—listen to the sweet song of the nightingale; **Half in love**—the phrase seems to suggest that the poet is as much in love with life as with death; **Easeful death**—death which provides comfort or relief from suffering; personified Death releases a man from the pains of life. **Called him soft names**—addressed Death by endearing names; **Mused rhyme**—poem; **Rich to die**—most desirable and enjoyable sort of death; **Cease**—just quietly stopping to breathe for ever; **With no pain**—this is the condition of a welcome death; **Pouring forth thy soul abroad**—loudly expressing the gladness of your heart in your song; **I have ears in vain**—the physical ears would cease to function at his death; the poet keenly imagines and anticipates the situation; **Requiem**—song of lament; here 'high' is used to suggest a very special and appealing kind of requiem; **Sod**—a lifeless lump of clay.

Stanza 7. Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!—the line has been interpreted variously; (a) The poet calls the song of the bird 'immortal' and not the actual bird singing to him; (b) He means not an individual nightingale, but nightingale as a species which will not die out; (c) He means one particular nightingale who sings to him and had sung to many others in different ages and at different times, because it is not just a bird, it is a 'Dryad' and therefore immortal. **Hungry generations tread thee down**—very realistically Keats anticipates that succeeding generations of mankind will suffer from wants desperately and will be reckless in violating good and worthy things of tradition. **Emperor and clown**—person of all ranks in the days of regular monarchy, from the King on the throne to the Fool who lived by humouring him; **Perhaps**—it shows that the poet is making imaginative suggestion; **Self-same song**—these very notes; **The sad heart of Ruth**—the song of the nightingale carries a touch of homely healing consolation in the midst of troubles of life, as it may have done to Ruth, a Moabitish woman in the Old Testament, who might have been consoled by it when she became a widow and spent her days gleaming corn in the field of Boaz, a Kinsman of her mother-in-law, Naomi, to maintain herself; **Sick for home**—longing for her home in Moab, **Alien Corn**—corn field of Boaz in Judah. **Charm'd**—cast a supernatural spell, a word full of the flavour of the mysterious Middle Ages; **Magic casements**—windows of the enchanted castle in

which an evil fairy has kept a princess imprisoned; **Opening on the foam**—surrounded by foamy seas i.e., situated on a small island; **Perilous seas**—sea which is too full of big waves and dangerous sea animals to be crossed; **Faery lands**—a land of imagination which lies only in the minds of children and stories of romances; **Forlorn**—deserted, lonely and desolate; in this stanza it refers to the imprisoned princess who listens to the nightingale.

Stanza 8. Forlorn—repeated, like an echo, from the end of the previous stanza, now it refers to the poet roused to reality; **Toll me back**—bring back my mind as if by ringing a loud bell; **Sole self**—lonely existence; **Adieu**—the first farewell bidding is addressed to fancy, which was so long giving the poet its company; **Deceiving elf**—fancy by its trick, creates a false, colourful and pleasant world which soon dissolves into air; **Adieu; Adieu!**—this is the farewell address to the nightingale which is flying away from the garden; **Plaintive anthem**—now the nightingale's song is not that happy, joyous, ecstatic melody, but a melancholy complaining one, because the poet's mood has changed. **Past the near meadows.....next valley-glades**—the song gradually fades as the bird flies farther and farther away, till at last its voice is heard no more from the valley on the other side of the hills. **Was it a vision**—the poet cannot decide whether all the experience of roaming with the nightingale in the time machine of fancy was merely a dream in course of sleep; **waking dream**—daydream or reverie, during which the mind sees things which are not there, without being really unconscious. **Do I wake or sleep?**—the intense imaginative experience still has its confusing spell on the poet, and he is not sure whether the dream was true or whether this reality is only a dream; the real and the unreal continue to interchange their places in his mind.

EXPLANATIONS

1. "'Tis not through envy.....
.....in thine happiness,"

Occurring in the middle of the very first stanza of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*, these lines record a paradoxical reaction of the song of the nightingale on the poet's mind. Being personally very unhappy, he should have been jealous of the bird which can sing so joyously and enthusiastically. But the poet wants to forget his own sorrows through empathy with the nightingale. He seeks to bask in the reflected gaiety of the singing bird, and share its happiness whole-heartedly. That way he hopes to keep away

the gloom and frustration of his personal life. The nightingale is fortunate that it can live in its lovely forest world, aloof from the sordid reality of the earth, whereas men like Keats must accept the misfortune of being constantly victims of pain, loss and frustration. But through his intense love and admiration for the bird's song, the poet tends to identify himself with the maker of the song and thereby achieve immunity from suffering for the time being.

Apart from the poetic beauty and subtlety of expression, the above lines also illustrate Keats's negative capability, the power to forget his self in the contemplation of the subject which absorbs his mind.

2. O, for a beaker full of.....purple-stained mouth;

The lines, some of the most famous in English Romantic poetry, express Keats's intense yearning for a life of beautiful sensuousness and imaginative fervour as against the paleness and misery of his actual life. The nightingale's song excites in the poet a desire to drink the rich wine produced in the sunny warm Southern France and it calls up a lovely concrete imagery of wine just poured into a goblet, filling it up to its rim; and the bead-shaped bubbles on the surface seem to blink like small babies; and then, jumping a step, it shows the immediate effect of drinking on the face of the drinker—the lips getting reddened by the colour of the wine. The feeling of enjoying the sensuous delight is carried to its completeness.

But it is the line, 'Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene' that needs real explanation. The poet wants that the wine should have the poetic efficacy of the genuine water of Hippocrene, one of the sacred springs mentioned in Greek mythology as a haunt of Muses, whose water was supposed to inspire the drinker to write great poetry. It means that the poet wishes the drink to aid his imagination. But at the same time he would not like to forego the visual richness of the wine's purple colour, which is not to be found in the mythological water of the sacred spring. So he desires a combination of both in the phrase 'the blushful Hippocrene' which lies only in his fancy.

The lines are notable for Keats's love of classical myths to which he frequently alludes, for his characteristically rich sensuousness, for the magical beauty of his diction, for the lovely melody and unforgettable imagery.

3. Where youth grows pale.....Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

The whole of the third stanza of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* is the most memorable poetic record of the tragic suffering of humanity at large.

In sharp contrast to the ever-glad song of the nightingale the earthly

life of man is full of groaning. At all stages of human existence there is continuous and inescapable affliction of extreme nature. The feebleness and emptiness of old age is signified by the image of the baldish head and more sad-looking by the presence of a few grey hairs. It is more tragic to see how even a young man, who should be in the prime of health, falls victim to a disease like consumption and gradually becomes bloodless and emaciated enough to look like a skeleton and finally meets a premature death. Beauty, which is essentially reflected in the bright eyes of a young person, is too transient and time soon changes it to a tired look. Nor is love, which is the greatest charm in life, able to survive long, but seeks variations and new objects. So, altogether there is nothing to be cheerful and optimistic about our life; and since it is so, a desire to escape from life comes quite naturally in the poet's mind.

Such generalization about human life gives a note of poignancy to the whole statement. But the poetic beauty of expression makes the pains of life serve the purpose of artistic pleasure. One is reminded of Shelley's wonderful and true assessment of human psychology: 'Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.' Hence what we find here is the quintessence of genuine romanticism.

4. **Away! away! for I will fly.....dull brain perplexes and retards.**

Presuming an affinity with the nightingale the poet wants to fly away to the nightingale, flying in both the senses of escape and take to the aerial route. He wants to take refuge to the forest world of the nightingale to avoid the troubles and sorrows of earthly life. But he revises his earlier idea of submitting to the intoxication of liquor to achieve the forgetfulness of the sordid reality. He seeks the help of poetic imagination, whose wings are invisible but swift enough to compete with any bird's flight, rather than of Bacchus, the god of wine and wild revelry, who is described in the classical mythology as riding on leopards. The drowsiness of his brain still persists and creates a physical discomfort which ought to hamper any speedy movement. But imagination defies and surmounts all kinds of physical limitations and creates its own sublime world.

The above lines, while expressing the poet's indomitable desire to fly away from the circumstances of real life to the happy melodious atmosphere of the nightingale's forest, strikes a nice balance between fancy and mythology on the one hand and the sensuous effort of overcoming a real dullness and confusion in the head, on the other. In fact the last line, by its very verbal effect seems to project the image of a final struggle to shake off the earthly pull and physical weakness, before taking to the wings of

fancy for an exclusive, intimate company of the nightingale.

5. **Already with thee!.....all her starry Fays.**

By virtue of his wonderful imagination Keats can transport himself instantaneously from the garden bench to the thickly leafy branch of the tree and be seated right beside the nightingale in cool darkness. The outside world is totally invisible from here and the poet's sensuous vision is playing a second fiddle to his other faculties.

The tactile sense records the softness and coolness of the night and the poet vividly guesses the situation out in the sky of summer. In the clear nocturnal sky the moon is reigning like the Queen of night; using some white cloud as her throne, she must be shining brightly. And the small stars around her are like numerous attendants of the gracious regal moon. In Keats's sweet mythical imagination, the moon is personified as the Queen, while the stars are like small fairies.

But this image, the poet consciously notes, has been called up under a presumption, because being 'already with thee', juxtaposed physically with the apostrophized bird, the poet's negative capability keeps him strictly darkling like the nightingale and he cannot see what is actually there in the sky. It is this strength of imagination that accounts for the poetic truth of the lyric and the beauty of the whole image is conditioned by the adverb, 'haply' a poetic term for 'perhaps'.

6. **Now more than ever seems it rich to die.....such an ecstasy!**

These lines from Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* express a purely romantic creed in melodious poetry. Life's pain and misery drives the poet to fall in love with death. The thought of escaping the grinding of mortal life has frequently prompted the thought of death. Choosing a moment to die, is a basic romantic idea expressed in Keats's letters and poetry.

Here the poet has discovered the ideal moment and mode of death. Death, cessation from the effort of living must be totally painless; it is a gradual process of slowly dissolving into sleep that will never break. It is, to a romantic, definitely most pleasant and enjoyable; it is the ultimate luxury a living being can experience. Now, when the nightingale is singing his glad song, the poet would like to court a slow and peaceful death, just sink to unconsciousness for ever, happy to think that the last moment of his consciousness was gladdened by the sweet song of the bird, in the otherwise profoundly silent midnight.

These lines on death strike a note of contrast with the sonnet called 'The Fear of Death', where he shudders at the possibility of imminent and

premature death which will crush his love and ambition. But in some sonnets to Fanny and in *The Bright Star*, he clearly prefers death to a frustrated life of torment.

7. **Thou wast not born for death.....tread thee down.**

This startling observation at the beginning of stanza seven is related to the central theme of the poem: the contrast between ephemeral mortal life of man and the immortal or eternal life of the nightingale. The thought of his own mortality in the preceding sixth stanza turns the poet's mind to something which is not subject to death and can serve as a source of hope and permanent joy.

The phrase 'immortal Bird' sounds like a paradox because a nightingale's life-span, in factual calculation, is much smaller than that of a human being. So, to follow realistic logic, it is absurd to accept that a particular bird is immune to death and going on singing for centuries. Critics have tried to explain the line in various ways. Some think that it is the bird's song which is immortal and not the bird itself. Some interpret that Keats is thinking of the nightingale as a species of bird, asserting its continuous existence since very ancient days and predicting its imperishability and not of a particular nightingale. This idea may be supported by the third line of the stanza, 'The voice I hear this passing night...' But it is relevant to the voice of the 'light winged Dryad' of the first stanza, as Garrod has pointed out, so that the nightingale is not a corporal bird, but an object of imagination, like a fairy. Therefore, by poetic logic, it can be immortal, defying the rules of the physical world. And the poet asserts the superiority of this eternal singer to anything found in the temporal human world. Man is subject to the cruel necessity of heartless striving against each other and succeeding generations are compelled to push out the preceding ones to make room for themselves. No human singer or poet, Keats seems to say, can remain immortal like the nightingale is.

There is however, a further subtlety to be discovered in the provoking line. There may be a conscious or unconscious pun between 'Bird' and 'Bard'! The nightingale is claimed to be immortal by a human poet; and while it matters little to the nightingale itself whether it is immortal or not, the poet by writing a wonderful song on the nightingale, has become immortal.

8. **Perhaps the self-same song.....faery lands forlorn.**

The poet gives full play to his imaginative speculation about the immortal nightingale singing its magical notes unendingly to delight men and women

of the past as well as the present. Keats thinks that the same song of the same bird which has cast a spell on him, was enjoyed by kings and clowns of ancient times and it might have given some relief and consolation to Ruth, the young woman mentioned in the Old Testament, who felt so sad and lonely in an unknown cornfield. And it is the same song that by its wondrous power did open up the charmed windows of the fairy-castle on islands surrounded by wavy seas, for the benefit of some imprisoned princess. But all these come from a fanciful conjecture in the characteristic romantic manner, prefaced by 'Perhaps'. The suggestive images are evoked artistically, without resorting to laborious narration.

The stanza is marked by Keats's allusive style. The reference to Ruth, a Moabite woman who had been married to a man of Bethlehem-Judah, lost her husband, went with her mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem and sought to make over living by 'gleaning corn' in the foreign field, takes our mind to a far off land and at the same time makes us sympathize with the woman standing in the fields of Boaz. The phrase 'Charm'd magic casements' strikes a key-note, conveying to us the essence of medieval romance and fairy-tale. The imaginative journey to 'fairy lands forlorn' is indicative of the infinite power of the 'viewless wings of poesy'.

9. 'Forlorn! the very word.....deceiving elf.'

For Keats every word had its distinct effect on mind and senses and the special words had the efficacy of ruling the heart of a sensitive poet like him. Here the word 'forlorn', which had ended the preceding stanza, has been meaningfully and deliberately echoed. The sound of the word is like the musical sound of a bell tolling perhaps from the top of a tower. It recalls the poet from the borders of the distant and vaguely mysterious fairy land, to which his mind had strayed, to himself and to reality. He wakes up from the imaginative reverie to feel his acute loneliness, a complete absence of company. He realizes the unpleasant truth that fancy, though capable of roaming anywhere, has its limitation and its fit, like a dream, can never be unending. Sooner or later the dreamer is brought down on his feet to stark reality. The poet was under a delusion that the fancy might be eternally sustained. But, disillusioned, he blames fancy for having cheated him by claiming to make him forget his earthly sorrows, a power which is beyond it. Hence, he bids fancy good bye as he says farewell to the nightingale which is now flying away. For some moments the bird's song so inspired his imagination that he transcended reality and happily drowned his miseries into a contemplation of beauties. But he takes the disillusionment in a proper spirit of acceptance.

The lines show that great as Keats was as a romantic dreamer, he was not a determined escapist and never so irresponsible and reckless in his fancy as Shelley is in *To a Skylark*.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. 1. Write a critical appreciation of *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Ans. It will be difficult to find in the whole range of English poetry a more truly romantic lyric and a better penetration into the mysteries of life and death in a mood of complete absorption in beauty. The ode is intensely lyrical, yet its thoughts are elaborate enough to form a comprehensive philosophy in combination with imagination and sensuous experience. Keats's poetic genius attains maturity to find its most perfect expression in a few wonderful odes, and *Ode to a Nightingale* is undoubtedly at the centre of the selected band.

The nightingale's song, heard by the poet in the Hampstead Garden, triggers a series of sensations and thoughts and builds up imaginative situations, in the mind of the poet. It produces myths, gorgeous imagery, subtle psychological perception and takes us through momentous experience of personal memory and historical imagination. All through the poem, we are keenly alive to Keats's sensitive study of nature's charm and beauties, while a poignant sense of melancholy pervades the atmosphere. But above all, and superintending other elements, is the astonishing flight and magical power of imagination.

The pattern of thought in the Ode is apparently complex and not smoothly linked in parts. But the occasion as well as the basic impulse and atmospheric effect, externally spelt through the music and the imagery, secure unity and solidarity of this creative artistic production. It starts with a feeling of drowsiness and ends with the final clearing of that smokiness of the brain. The entire period in between was a spell cast by the nightingale's melody on the highly sensitive and imaginative mind of the poet.

One of the main ideas in this romantic poem is a sincere yearning to get away from the miseries and frustrations of life, to escape 'the weariness, the fever and the fret', which the poet experienced from his failure to achieve fame, love and health. What he generalizes as the lot of humanity is authentically based on his personal afflictions. The nightingale, the source of the purely joyous music, is a symbol of perfect happiness and beauty; and its world amidst the forest is the ideal world offering a total contrast to the sordid, painful and morbid world of man. This purely romantic conception of aspiring for the ideal and bewailing the fact that it cannot

be achieved by mortal man, is comparable to the attitude of Shelley in *To a Skylark* and of Yeats in *The Stolen Child*.

Keats calls the nightingale 'light-winged Dryad of the trees', who sings of the joyous summer and whose song is imaginatively associated with the warm Southern countries of 'Dance and Provençal song' and 'sunburnt mirth'. The thirst for wine brings in the beautiful sensuous image of a 'beaker full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene/With beaded bubbles winking at the brim/And purple-stained mouth'. Allusions and concrete imagery reinforce each other to produce the whole sensuous impact as unforgettable. We not only have the rich colour of the wine, but also the emphatic suggestion of its poetic efficacy. The small bubbles with their bead-like shapes and restless movement are compared to curious children peeping at the outside world from the rim of the container and winking.

The poet's intense sense awareness is active equally vigorously in the depiction of the picture of tragedies of human life:

'Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last, grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale and spectre thin and dies.'

From this stark and gruesome reality the poet wants to escape on the 'viewless wings' of imagination to the world of the nightingale. By virtue of his unfettered romantic fancy he can lose himself in the midst of the dark foliage of the trees and sit beside the nightingale. It has a miraculous power to deport him through time and space anywhere in the universe. It is this imagination which immediately leads to the creation of a mythical image of Spenserian sweetness:

'And haply the Queen Moon is on her throne
Clustered around by all her starry Fays.'

The richly sensuous stanza on flowers where the sense of smell is most exhaustively exercised, is justly famous. The poet at once takes us into the enchantingly fragrant atmosphere of the dark garden, where we inhale and identify white hawthorns, eglantines, violets and the musk-rose, astonishingly mythed as 'Mid-May's eldest child'. At the same time a unique melodious effect is achieved by the ultimate verse of this stanza: 'The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.'

Ode to a Nightingale has a note of searching melancholy and is inspired by the poet's personal sufferings and disappointments in life, the latest of which was the death of his brother, Thomas Keats. Not only does he want to escape to the nightingale's forest, but he also yearns for death. Life's torture has taught him to love Death and call him 'soft names'. The wish

'to cease upon the midnight with no pain' and with the nightingale's song in his ears, is a purely romantic wish.

The beginning of the next stanza, contrary to the opinion of some critics, is not at all abrupt. It is the thought of death or mortality that naturally leads to its opposite thought, that of immortality. It enables the poet to highlight the contrast between the world of man and that of the nightingale in a climactic manner. With a philosophical imagination Keats calls the nightingale 'Immortal Bird'. The phrase has been variously interpreted, the most common of them being that the poet is calling not a particular bird, but the nightingale as a species, immortal. Some think that it is not the bird, but its song which is immortal in its appeal. But it is more reasonable to agree with Garrod who points out that the particular nightingale is addressed as 'Immortal' because Keats has called it 'light winged Dryad of the trees' at the outset, a creature of myth, like nymphs and fairies, which, being purely imaginary, are not subject to death.

Since the bird is immortal its song is literally timeless and defies the barrier of space. The poet imagines that the same nightingale which is singing to him now had gladdened the hearts of monarchs as well as fools in ancient days, relieved the gloom of Ruth's mind in the biblical times and even had consoled the captive princess of the fairy tales. The powerful imagination thus sweeps all over the universe and blends together the real and the imaginary. The drab world of reality is linked by its aerial ray with the 'faery lands forlorn'.

But though the wings of imagination floats the poet wherever he wishes to fly, Keats retains artistic control over his creation. The quick succession of thoughts, spontaneous, rich and colourful, are beautifully stranded together as the colours in a rainbow. The whole effusion is occasioned by the nightingale's song and at the end, the poet is waked up to reality from his 'vision' or reverie when the bird flies away and its song fades into silence. Meanwhile his mind has ranged from the garden bench to the farthest 'charmed casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas', only to return to the starting point, after completing a circle. Structurally the poetic frame-work, containing the feelings, thoughts and fancies, is admirably sound.

Q. 2. Is Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* a poem of escape or a reflection of human experience?

Ans. A highly imaginative and purely romantic poet like Shelley or Keats cannot be reconciled with the real life which they feel as oppressive and restrictive in every way. In all their representative creations an urge for getting rid of the tyranny and bondage of social life must be inevitably

betrayed. *Ode to a Nightingale* being one of Keats's most significant poetical utterances, does illustrate an escapist trend of the poet. However before making any final appraisal of this feature in the poem, we have to consider what the term 'escapism' implies and whether in Keats's poetry it is a passing mood or a permanent obsession.

'Escapism' is usually a pejorative term, it is used to denote a strong reproof, a criticism of the habit of shirking or avoiding duties, a failure to face life's trials. Escapists run away from harsh, unpleasant facts and duties and try to hide themselves in their idle world of dream and peace, like an ostrich hiding its head in the sands during storms on the desert. It implies cowardice and spinelessness. Yes, a note of escapism is sounded clearly in *Ode to a Nightingale* because the poet wants passionately to 'leave the world unseen' and with the nightingale 'fade away into the forest dim.'

First, the poet thinks of forgetting his personal loss and suffering in life by drinking and sleeping under the influence of the liquor. He thinks that the sweet song of the nightingale is a sure testimony of the absolutely happy world of the bird. The poet, therefore, eagerly wants to escape from the life of reality, which has given him a surfeit of torment and misery in the forms of ill health, unsuccess in poetic career and in love and bereavement of a younger brother and seek refuge in the forest world of the nightingale.

His personal afflictions are also seen as part of the sad lot of humanity as a whole. The general picture of malady is undeniably moving in its pitiful starkness:

' Here, where men sit and hear each other groan ;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last, grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow

And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.'

This vivid depiction of the negative side of life makes all readers acutely feel a desire to escape from here. And the poet passionately and emphatically cries out:

'Away! away! for I will fly to thee'

He decides to fly on the wings of poetic imagination and stays in the company of the nightingale on the shady branch of a leafy tree. He indulges in the contemplation of nature's beauty and pleasures.

The note of escapism asserts more strongly in the death-wish of the poet. The soothing darkness brings up his desire for dark death.

‘..... for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain....’

The poet definitely asserts the yearning to court painless death in order to escape the constantly painful life.

But to call Keats merely an escapist on the basis of the lines quoted in the above discussion, would hardly be a just conclusion. His criticism of life undeniably implies his passionate love for its positive qualities and charms. His delightful evocation of the ‘Dance and Provencal song and sunburnt mirth’ and his wish for

‘.... a beaker full of the warm South
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth.’

is an undeniable proof of his love for warmth and joys of life.

The beautiful sensuous lines on the Queen Moon, ‘Starry Fays’ and the scented flowers of the season, bear eloquent testimony to his love for and intense appreciation of the gifts of nature which he wanted to explore and cherish. The spirit and attitude betrayed here is positively youthful and enthusiastic. His whole being is involved in this eternal celebration of life.

No idle escapist has the capacity to think, as Keats has done in this ode, about the relation of ideal art, represented by the nightingale’s song and the transient, ever-changing life of reality. The nightingale was ‘not born for death’, he asserts and immediately re-asserts his conviction by calling it ‘immortal Bird!’ But man is simply mortal and in his world of mortality nothing lasts long, being devoured by time and treaded down by ‘hungry generations’.

Moreover, if the escapist mood had become dominant for some moments due to frustrations and vexations of life, Keats finally does not fail to realize that escape from reality is absurd and realistically he can feel that the nightingale’s song is nothing as joyous as it pretended to be, but a ‘plaintive anthem’. At the end of the poem he wakes up from his indolent dream to face actual life on its terms.

Thus *Ode to a Nightingale* may truly be described as a wonderful poetic record of the poet's reflection of human experience.

Q. 3. How the contrast between transience of life and permanence of art has been presented in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*?

Ans. Graham Hough perceived that Keats's major odes 'are closely bound up with this theme of transience and permanence'. It is his romantic urge that forces him, after acutely feeling the tragic loss of all that is lovable and precious in life in the inevitable flux of the world of reality, to discover an imaginative resource of permanent beauty and happiness, which would defy the decaying power of time. And in his poetry he continually makes an 'attempt to reconcile the contradiction' between mutability of human life and permanence of art.

Ode to a Nightingale begins by pitting the poet's heart-ache against the 'full-throated ease' of the nightingale's song whose joyous melody is symbolic of the undying beauty of art; and by suggesting a reconciliation of the contraries by 'being too happy in thine happiness'. But nevertheless, the intensity of the contrast between the nightingale's forest world and the painful, troubled and decaying human world is brought into sharp focus in Stanza Third : the nightingale 'among the leaves' is completely free from

'The weariness, the fever and the fret' of the world
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin, and dies,
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs,
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.'

The focus is predominantly on the ephemeral character of all that is valuable and desirable in life. Human sorrow and suffering and loss are mainly due to the decay and fickleness of youth, health, beauty and love. The quickly perishable charms of life under the ruthless domination of devouring time only leaves an inevitable sense of inconsolable gloom and despair. The destructive process in the life of reality is also expedited by 'hungry generations' treading on the existing beings and things.

In sharp contrast to this, the nightingale is called 'immortal', 'not born for death' and its song, which represents ideal beauty of art, has an eternal and universal appeal. It is omnipresent in all times and places and casts its spell unflinchingly on John Keats as well as on kings and Ruth and the captive princess of the medieval Romance and fairy tales.

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The contrast between the imperishability of the world of art or the emblem of imagination and the transience of life, is a common theme in romantic poetry and analogies are frequent in Shelley and Yeats. But what gives greater depth to, and accounts for the subtler effect of Keats's presentation of this contrast is his ironical and paradoxical awareness of the other side of things. The moment, when Keats listens to the superb spell of the nightingale and glorifies its song as well as the singer as 'immortal', is not measured in terms of clock-time or calender-time, it is an 'eternal moment' as Forster calls it ; and once 'eternal', it remains so even after the fading away of the 'plaintive anthem', with the flying away of the bird to the other side of the hill.

Moreover, it is the bard, a human creator, who invests the nightingale with immortality by glorifying its song in his song that hopes to attain immortality. In reality a nightingale's life-span is much shorter than a man's and its song survives only in the sense of a kind of song sung by successive generations of nightingales; whereas in case of a great poet like Keats, his individual song endures.

The poem ends by admitting in a very sensible manner the impossibility of achieving freedom from the tethers of the struggles and pains and frustration of life through imagination for ever, because 'the fancy cannot cheat so well/As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf'. The implication in 'so well' includes a stress on 'so long' too. But the quality and intensity of this joy and freedom achieved through artistic fancy has an eternal value. John Barnard has rightly observed : 'The paradox of the poem is that by admitting failure it, as if inadvertently, demonstrates the grandeurs of the human singer, who within his limits, gives the bird immortality—an immortality that exists only in the human mind'. It is our capacity of thought which makes our mortality so palpable to us and makes us 'full of sorrow'. But the nightingale is unthinking, so it cannot possible comprehended the advantage of immortality and accompanying feeling of superiority.

Q. 4. '*Ode to a Nightingale*, unlike Keats's other odes, has no single central theme'. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

Ans. Analysing the contents of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* according to prosaic logic, one may naturally think that the poem is full of diverse thoughts. It begins with an expression of dull pain suffered by the poet which seeks a relief in the joyous song of the nightingale. It draws a contrast between his deep drowsiness and the bird's full-throated song

and Dryad-like charm in the beech-green forest. The second stanza records a picture of 'Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth' in summer in Southern France, born out of the poet's desire for 'a beaker full of wine' which he needs to drink in order to forget the world of reality and escape from it to the nightingale's world. The third stanza concentrates on the misery and plight of human beings on earth, where suffering and death are the only certainty, and youth, beauty and love are constantly facing extinction. The fourth and fifth stanzas contain the poet's imaginative experience of sitting on the leafy tree with the nightingale in the 'embalmed darkness' and anticipating the beauty of the moonlit sky above and the charm of the fragrant flowery garden below. The sixth stanza brings back his focus on the nightingale's song itself and triggers off his constitutional desire for death, which flares up at this opportune moment, when the bird's song can serve as a requiem. The seventh stanza contains an emphatic assertion of the nightingale's immortality, and the poet, flying on the wings of imagination, traverses an unending amount of space and time to affirm that the same nightingale sang from days immemorial to persons of all kinds, in life and in fiction. Finally, in the last stanza the poet wakes up from his dream, at the fading away of the nightingale's song, as the bird flies across the hills. He is faced with stark reality and realizes that fancy cannot indefinitely prolong its spell on human mind.

There are, thus, a variety of topics introduced in the flow of thoughts that constitute the poem. But to think that it has no central theme or unifying motif is to betray an indifference to the wonderful powers of poetic imagination that sustains the entire ode and the unique artistic design that gives an undeniable coherence to its structure. It is true that *Ode on a Grecian Urn* concentrates only on the pictures of the urn, their effects and significance; and *Ode to Autumn* is dedicated on the opulence and beauty of Autumn, without much philosophic reflection. But *Ode to a Nightingale*, in spite of being more passionate in mood, more complex in psychological probe and more full of sudden twists and turns of thought by way of dramatic reactions to what precedes and anticipation of what may follow, does not in any way forfeit its unity of appeal.

'The ode begins and ends in real time and is in a very profound way bound by time. Living in real time, the nightingale provides the plot by impinging on the poet's consciousness, so provoking the reflections that make up the poem, before flying away....' This is the fact, as observed by John Barnard in his *John Keats*, that accounts for the thematic unity of

the ode. The thought of a soporific drug in first stanza leads to the thought of wine in second stanza and the thought of flight from reality. The reason for this desire to escape is given in third stanza. The escape is achieved through imagination in fourth stanza and this and the next stanza, dwell on a peaceful, relaxed enjoyment of the sensuous beauty of nature. The topic of death in sixth stanza is allied to the desire to escape already mooted in the earlier stanza. Robert Bridges has complained of an unexpected shift of thought in seventh stanza. But the key-line, 'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!' has come naturally and with inevitable poetic logic, as a contrast to the poet's own and of man's, mortality, a contrast which is very much the central theme. It is a moment which is timeless, this impression is created by the magical voice of the nightingale and the same spell is conveyed on us by the wonderful song of the poet. So, it is idle to complain that the poem lacks a definite central theme. Rather the unity of the basic inspiration is felt again and again in the depth of our hearts and it is clearly betrayed in the diction as well. The 'fade away' of second stanza is echoed by 'Fade for away' in third stanza, and 'Away! away! for I will fly with thee' in fourth stanza. The 'hungry generations' in seventh stanza recalls the sordid picture of life in third stanza. It is the last word, 'forlorn' in sixth stanza which is repeated like a refrain at the beginning of seventh stanza to mark a bridge between the land of fancy and the solid ground of reality. What more could be expected by way of thematic unity in a genuine romantic poetry where passion and imagination enjoy the right to blossom fully?