

## John Keats

### Context

In his short life, John Keats wrote some of the most beautiful and enduring poems in the English language. Among his greatest achievements is his sequence of six lyric odes, written between March and September 1819--astonishingly, when Keats was only twenty-four years old. Keats's poetic achievement is made all the more miraculous by the age at which it ended: He died barely a year after finishing the ode "To Autumn," in February 1821. Keats was born in 1795 to a lower-middle-class family in London. When he was still young, he lost both his parents. His mother succumbed to tuberculosis, the disease that eventually killed Keats himself. When he was fifteen, Keats entered into a medical apprenticeship, and eventually he went to medical school. But by the time he turned twenty, he abandoned his medical training to devote himself wholly to poetry. He published his first book of poems in 1817; they drew savage critical attacks from an influential magazine, and his second book attracted comparatively little notice when it appeared the next year. Keats's brother Tom died of tuberculosis in December 1818, and Keats moved in with a friend in Hampstead.

In Hampstead, he fell in love with a young girl named Fanny Brawne. During this time, Keats began to experience the extraordinary creative inspiration that enabled him to write, at a frantic rate, all his best poems in the time before he died. His health and his finances declined sharply, and he set off for Italy in the summer of 1820, hoping the warmer climate might restore his health. He never returned home. His death brought to an untimely end one of the most extraordinary poetic careers of the nineteenth century--indeed, one of the most extraordinary poetic careers of all time. Keats never achieved widespread recognition for his work in his own life (his bitter request for his tombstone: "Here lies one whose name was writ on water"), but he was sustained by a deep inner confidence in his own ability. Shortly before his death, he remarked that he believed he would be among "the English poets" when he had died. Keats was one of the most important figures of early nineteenth-century Romanticism, a movement that espoused the sanctity of emotion and imagination, and privileged the beauty of the natural world. Many of the ideas and themes evident in Keats's great odes are quintessentially Romantic concerns: the beauty of nature, the relation between imagination and creativity, the response of the passions to beauty and suffering, and the transience of human life in time. The sumptuous sensory language in which the odes are written, their idealistic concern for beauty and truth, and their expressive agony in the face of death are all Romantic preoccupations--though at the same time, they are all uniquely Keats's.

Taken together, the odes do not exactly tell a story--there is no unifying "plot" and no recurring characters--and there is little evidence that Keats intended them to stand together as a single work of art. Nevertheless, the extraordinary number of suggestive interrelations between them is impossible to ignore. The odes explore and develop the same themes, partake of many of the same approaches and images, and, ordered in a certain way, exhibit an unmistakable psychological development. This is not to say that the poems do not stand on their own--they do, magnificently; one of the greatest felicities of

the sequence is that it can be entered at any point, viewed wholly or partially from any perspective, and still prove moving and rewarding to read. There has been a great deal of critical debate over how to treat the voices that speak the poems--are they meant to be read as though a single person speaks them all, or did Keats invent a different persona for each ode?

There is no right answer to the question, but it is possible that the question itself is wrong: The consciousness at work in each of the odes is unmistakably Keats's own. Of course, the poems are not explicitly autobiographical (it is unlikely that all the events really *happened* to Keats), but given their sincerity and their shared frame of thematic reference, there is no reason to think that they do not come from the same part of Keats's mind--that is to say, that they are not all told by the same part of Keats's reflected self. In that sense, there is no harm in treating the odes a sequence of utterances told in the same voice. The psychological progress from "Ode on Indolence" to "To Autumn" is intimately personal, and a great deal of that intimacy is lost if one begins to imagine that the odes are spoken by a sequence of fictional characters. When you think of "the speaker" of these poems, think of Keats as he would have imagined himself while writing them. As you trace the speaker's trajectory from the numb drowsiness of "Indolence" to the quiet wisdom of "Autumn," try to hear the voice develop and change under the guidance of Keats's extraordinary language.

## Ode to a Nightingale

### Summary

The speaker opens with a declaration of his own heartache. He feels numb, as though he had taken a drug only a moment ago. He is addressing a nightingale he hears singing somewhere in the forest and says that his "drowsy numbness" is not from envy of the nightingale's happiness, but rather from sharing it too completely; he is "too happy" that the nightingale sings the music of summer from amid some unseen plot of green trees and shadows. In the second stanza, the speaker longs for the oblivion of alcohol, expressing his wish for wine, "a draught of vintage," that would taste like the country and like peasant dances, and let him "leave the world unseen" and disappear into the dim forest with the nightingale. In the third stanza, he explains his desire to fade away, saying he would like to forget the troubles the nightingale has never known: "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" of human life, with its consciousness that everything is mortal and nothing lasts. Youth "grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies," and "beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes." In the fourth stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale to fly away, and he will follow, not through alcohol ("Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards"), but through poetry, which will give him "viewless wings." He says he is already with the nightingale and describes the forest glade, where even the moonlight is hidden by the trees, except the light that breaks through when the breezes blow the branches. In the fifth stanza, the speaker says that he cannot see the flowers in the glade, but can guess them "in embalmed darkness": white hawthorne, eglantine, violets, and the musk-rose, "the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves." In the sixth stanza, the speaker listens in the dark to

the nightingale, saying that he has often been "half in love" with the idea of dying and called Death soft names in many rhymes. Surrounded by the nightingale's song, the speaker thinks that the idea of death seems richer than ever, and he longs to "cease upon the midnight with no pain" while the nightingale pours its soul ecstatically forth. If he were to die, the nightingale would continue to sing, he says, but he would "have ears in vain" and be no longer able to hear.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale that it is immortal, that it was not "born for death." He says that the voice he hears singing has always been heard, by ancient emperors and clowns, by homesick Ruth; he even says the song has often charmed open magic windows looking out over "the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." In the eighth stanza, the word forlorn tolls like a bell to restore the speaker from his preoccupation with the nightingale and back into himself. As the nightingale flies farther away from him, he laments that his imagination has failed him and says that he can no longer recall whether the nightingale's music was "a vision, or a waking dream." Now that the music is gone, the speaker cannot recall whether he himself is awake or asleep.

### **Form**

Like most of the other odes, "Ode to a Nightingale" is written in ten-line stanzas. However, unlike most of the other poems, it is metrically variable-- though not so much as "Ode to Psyche." The first seven and last two lines of each stanza are written in iambic pentameter; the eighth line of each stanza is written in trimeter, with only three accented syllables instead of five.

"Nightingale" also differs from the other odes in that its rhyme scheme is the same in every stanza (every other ode varies the order of rhyme in the final three or four lines except "To Psyche," which has the loosest structure of all the odes). Each stanza in "Nightingale" is rhymed ABABCDECDE, Keats's most basic scheme throughout the odes.

### **Themes**

With "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats's speaker begins his fullest and deepest exploration of the themes of creative expression and the mortality of human life. In this ode, the transience of life and the tragedy of old age ("where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies") is set against the eternal renewal of the nightingale's fluid music ("Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!"). The speaker reprises the "drowsy numbness" he experienced in "Ode on Indolence," but where in "Indolence" that numbness was a sign of disconnection from experience, in "Nightingale" it is a sign of too full a connection: "being too happy in thine happiness," as the speaker tells the nightingale. Hearing the song of the nightingale, the speaker longs to flee the human world and join the bird. His first thought is to reach the bird's state through alcohol--in the second stanza, he longs for a "draught of vintage" to transport him out of himself. But after his meditation in the third stanza on the transience of life, he rejects the idea of being "charioted by Bacchus and his pards" (Bacchus was the Roman god of wine and was supposed to have been carried by a chariot pulled by leopards)

and chooses instead to embrace, for the first time since he refused to follow the figures in "Indolence," "the viewless wings of Poesy."

The rapture of poetic inspiration matches the endless creative rapture of the nightingale's music and lets the speaker, in stanzas five through seven, imagine himself with the bird in the darkened forest. The ecstatic music even encourages the speaker to embrace the idea of dying, of painlessly succumbing to death while enraptured by the nightingale's music and never experiencing any further pain or disappointment. But when his meditation causes him to utter the word "forlorn," he comes back to himself, recognizing his fancy for what it is--an imagined escape from the inescapable ("Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf"). As the nightingale flies away, the intensity of the speaker's experience has left him shaken, unable to remember whether he is awake or asleep.

In "Indolence," the speaker rejected all artistic effort. In "Psyche," he was willing to embrace the creative imagination, but only for its own internal pleasures. But in the nightingale's song, he finds a form of outward expression that translates the work of the imagination into the outside world, and this is the discovery that compels him to embrace Poesy's "viewless wings" at last. The "art" of the nightingale is endlessly changeable and renewable; it is music without record, existing only in a perpetual present. As befits his celebration of music, the speaker's language, sensually rich though it is, serves to suppress the sense of sight in favor of the other senses. He can imagine the light of the moon, "But here there is no light"; he knows he is surrounded by flowers, but he "cannot see what flowers" are at his feet. This suppression will find its match in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which is in many ways a companion poem to "Ode to a Nightingale." In the later poem, the speaker will finally confront a created art-object not subject to any of the limitations of time; in "Nightingale," he has achieved creative expression and has placed his faith in it, but that expression--the nightingale's song--is spontaneous and without physical manifestation.

## Ode on a Grecian Urn

### Summary

In the first stanza, the speaker stands before an ancient Grecian urn and addresses it. He is preoccupied with its depiction of pictures frozen in time. It is the "still unravish'd bride of quietness," the "foster-child of silence and slow time." He also describes the urn as a "historian" that can tell a story. He wonders about the figures on the side of the urn and asks what legend they depict and from where they come. He looks at a picture that seems to depict a group of men pursuing a group of women and wonders what their story could be: "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

In the second stanza, the speaker looks at another picture on the urn, this time of a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker says that the piper's "unheard" melodies are sweeter than mortal melodies because they are unaffected by time. He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen in time, he should not

grieve, because her beauty will never fade. In the third stanza, he looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never shed their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his songs will be "for ever new," and happy that the love of the boy and the girl will last forever, unlike mortal love, which lapses into "breathing human passion" and eventually vanishes, leaving behind only a "burning forehead, and a parching tongue."

In the fourth stanza, the speaker examines another picture on the urn, this one of a group of villagers leading a heifer to be sacrificed. He wonders where they are going ("To what green altar, O mysterious priest...") and from where they have come. He imagines their little town, empty of all its citizens, and tells it that its streets will "for evermore" be silent, for those who have left it, frozen on the urn, will never return. In the final stanza, the speaker again addresses the urn itself, saying that it, like Eternity, "doth tease us out of thought." He thinks that when his generation is long dead, the urn will remain, telling future generations its enigmatic lesson: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." The speaker says that that is the only thing the urn knows and the only thing it needs to know.

### **Form**

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" follows the same ode-stanza structure as the "Ode on Melancholy," though it varies more the rhyme scheme of the last three lines of each stanza. Each of the five stanzas in "Grecian Urn" is ten lines long, metered in a relatively precise iambic pentameter, and divided into a two part rhyme scheme, the last three lines of which are variable. The first seven lines of each stanza follow an ABABCDE rhyme scheme, but the second occurrences of the CDE sounds do not follow the same order. In stanza one, lines seven through ten are rhymed DCE; in stanza two, CED; in stanzas three and four, CDE; and in stanza five, DCE, just as in stanza one. As in other odes (especially "Autumn" and "Melancholy"), the two-part rhyme scheme (the first part made of AB rhymes, the second of CDE rhymes) creates the sense of a two-part thematic structure as well. The first four lines of each stanza roughly define the subject of the stanza, and the last six roughly explicate or develop it. (As in other odes, this is only a general rule, true of some stanzas more than others; stanzas such as the fifth do not connect rhyme scheme and thematic structure closely at all.)

### **Themes**

If the "Ode to a Nightingale" portrays Keats's speaker's engagement with the fluid expressiveness of music, the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" portrays his attempt to engage with the static immobility of sculpture. The Grecian urn, passed down through countless centuries to the time of the speaker's viewing, exists outside of time in the human sense--it does not age, it does not die, and indeed it is alien to all such concepts. In the speaker's meditation, this creates an intriguing paradox for the human figures carved into the side of the urn: They are free from time, but they are simultaneously frozen in time. They do not have to confront aging and death (their love is "for ever young"), but neither can they have experience (the youth can never kiss the maiden; the figures in the procession can never return to their homes).

The speaker attempts three times to engage with scenes carved into the urn; each time he asks different questions of it. In the first stanza, he examines the picture of the "mad pursuit" and wonders what actual story lies behind the picture: "What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?" Of course, the urn can never tell him the whos, whats, whens, and wheres of the stories it depicts, and the speaker is forced to abandon this line of questioning.

In the second and third stanzas, he examines the picture of the piper playing to his lover beneath the trees. Here, the speaker tries to imagine what the experience of the figures on the urn must be like; he tries to identify with them. He is tempted by their escape from temporality and attracted to the eternal newness of the piper's unheard song and the eternally unchanging beauty of his lover. He thinks that their love is "far above" all transient human passion, which, in its sexual expression, inevitably leads to an abatement of intensity--when passion is satisfied, all that remains is a wearied physicality: a sorrowful heart, a "burning forehead," and a "parching tongue." His recollection of these conditions seems to remind the speaker that he is inescapably subject to them, and he abandons his attempt to identify with the figures on the urn.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker attempts to think about the figures on the urn as though they *were* experiencing human time, imagining that their procession has an origin (the "little town") and a destination (the "green altar"). But all he can think is that the town will forever be deserted: If these people have left their origin, they will never return to it. In this sense he confronts head-on the limits of static art; if it is impossible to learn from the urn the whos and wheres of the "real story" in the first stanza, it is impossible *ever* to know the origin and the destination of the figures on the urn in the fourth.

It is true that the speaker shows a certain kind of progress in his successive attempts to engage with the urn. His idle curiosity in the first attempt gives way to a more deeply felt identification in the second, and in the third, the speaker leaves his own concerns behind and thinks of the processional purely on its own terms, thinking of the "little town" with a real and generous feeling. But each attempt ultimately ends in failure. The third attempt fails simply because there is nothing more to say--once the speaker confronts the silence and eternal emptiness of the little town, he has reached the limit of static art; on this subject, at least, there is nothing more the urn can tell him.

In the final stanza, the speaker presents the conclusions drawn from his three attempts to engage with the urn. He is overwhelmed by its existence outside of temporal change, with its ability to "tease" him "out of thought / As doth eternity." If human life is a succession of "hungry generations," as the speaker suggests in "Nightingale," the urn is a separate and self-contained world. It can be a "friend to man," as the speaker says, but it cannot be mortal; the kind of aesthetic connection the speaker experiences with the urn is ultimately insufficient to human life.

The final two lines, in which the speaker imagines the urn speaking its message to mankind--"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," have proved among the most difficult to interpret in the Keats canon. After the urn utters the enigmatic phrase "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," no one can say for sure who "speaks"

the conclusion, "that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." It could be the speaker addressing the urn, and it could be the urn addressing mankind. If it is the speaker addressing the urn, then it would seem to indicate his awareness of its limitations: The urn may not need to know anything beyond the equation of beauty and truth, but the complications of human life make it impossible for such a simple and self-contained phrase to express sufficiently anything about necessary human knowledge. If it is the urn addressing mankind, then the phrase has rather the weight of an important lesson, as though *beyond* all the complications of human life, all human beings need to know on earth is that beauty and truth are one and the same. It is largely a matter of personal interpretation which reading to accept.

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