

BA Part II
Paper IV, Romantic Period
Unit 4 - (c)
&
BA, Eng Hons (CBCS) Second Semester
Paper Code – 202- ENGH-C4 (British Romantic Literature)

Ode to a Nightingale

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:

'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.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O 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;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

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 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.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, 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,

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard

In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

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 fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades

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?

Date, Occasion and Background of Composition:

It is difficult to ascertain exactly the date when Keats's *Ode to a nightingale* was composed. It is commonly believed that this poem, the first to be composed after *Ode to Psyche*, was written between late April and early May, 1819. Keats wrote this poem on some scraps of paper while living in Wentworth Place, Hampstead. Behind the background of the composition of this poem lies the poet's own experience of suffering, pain, and death. His brother Tom died on December 1, 1818, making the poet acquainted with the deep sorrow of death. He was also suffering from illness (particularly from a throat trouble which later brought in tuberculosis), and financial difficulties. Over and above these, he also felt the pangs of jealousy that arose out of his passionate love for Fanny Brawne. No doubt these bitter facts of life have lent a profound poignancy to the present poem, and are responsible for the contemporary picture of the society drawn so faithfully and his wish for death.

Central Idea:

The central idea of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* moves round the theme of a contrast between the ideal world and the world of reality. The ideal world has been represented by the nightingale, while the poet himself stands for the world of reality. The ideal world has been created with the help of imagination and the real world by the afflicted men of the society.

In the ideal world lives the nightingale which is a symbol of youth and beauty, of joy and happiness. The bird is immortal; no hungry generations can press it down. It can gladden and console the rich as well as the poor. It brings solace to all people in all ages. Living in a sort of eternal present, it is not tortured by the burden of consciousness. That is why pain and misery can never spoil its peace; nor can they ever come near its romantic grove filled with perfumed darkness.

In the world of reality lives the poor who feels heavy –hearted on account of ‘the weariness, the fever, and the fret’ of the world. Here men suffer helplessly with no relief coming. Here a youth soon grows pale and dies before his time. Here a woman cannot keep her beauty for long. Here even a lover cannot maintain his constancy beyond a short period.

As a result of this the poet wishes to escape into the happy world of the nightingale where his aspiration towards a life of beauty away from the oppressing world has a chance of fulfillment. He reaches this ideal world with the help of his poetic imagination, and shares the ecstasy of the bird for some time. But the hard world of reality soon pulls him down, and leaves him in a dazed state.

The central idea of the poem is, thus, a meditation on the immortal beauty of the nightingale's song and the sadness of the observer, who must in the end accept sorrow and mortality.

Introduction to Ode:

An ode (from the Greek word *ode* meaning a song) is a lyric poem long in length, serious in subject, dignified in style, and complicated in form. The originator of the form is supposed to be Pindar, a Greek poet, who used the ode as a choral song to be sung and danced at a public occasion, such as the celebration of a heroic feat. The stanzas of the Pindaric ode were arranged in sets of three. The ‘strophe’ was

sung while the chorus moved in one direction (usually the left), the ‘antistrophe’, which had the same metrical form, while it moved in another (usually the right), and the ‘epode’, which had a different form, as it stood still. A typical example of such an ode is Wordsworth’s *Ode : Intimations of Immortality*. The Horatian ode is one in which each stanza follows the same metrical pattern. Such odes are more personal, reflective, and restrained than those of Pindar. A typical example of the Horatian ode is Keats’s *Ode to Nightingale*.

Nightingale:

It is a kind of migratory bird of the thrush family having more than three hundred species. Reddish brown above and grayish white underneath, the bird has a chestnut-coloured tail. It feeds mainly upon worms and insects, and eats small fruits in the autumn. In summer it lives in woodlands having dense undergrowth, in dense thickets, or in hedgegroves. It is hardly visible as it conceals itself in the thick layers of leaves. The females do not sing. The males sing mostly during the breeding season. The nightingale is different from the ‘bulbul’ which is larger, different in colour, and has a tuft hair in its nape.

Theme:

Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale* presents contrast between the ideal and the real, between the beauty and ugliness, between the realm of romance and the realm of reality, between the world of imagination and the world of actuality, between the happy world of the nightingale and the sorrowful world of human beings. Another theme dealt within the poem is the contrast between immortality and death. The immortality of the nightingale throws in sharper relief the mortality of men- men trodden down pitifully by the ‘hungry generations’. The third theme explored in the poem is the performance of art (by the nature of its perfection and the ability to delight men of diverse places in diverse times the song of the nightingale has indeed been raised to the level of ‘art’) and the transience of life, the long lastingness of the bird’s song and the brevity of human beauty and youth, of love and joy. The bird’s song is able to console all kinds of men in all ages, while man’s beauty, youth, and joy are like trembling water-drops on a lotus-leaf vanishing as soon as the body perishes. The fourth theme treated in the poem is the contrast between escape and involvement, between the pleasure of flying to a romantic land

of heart's content with the help of imagination and the sorrow and suffering of participation in a world of hard reality marked by disease, decay, and death. Since, however, the poet is undecided about the comparative merit and value of these two things, the poem ends in a question or in a note of uncertainty. The fifth theme consists of 'the intoxicating, almost stupefying, beauty of the bird's song, heard in darkness, and the experience it brings with it of momentary release from the weight of mortal care'. The sixth theme is thought not to be the nightingale but 'the aspiration towards a life of beauty away from the oppressing world'. Finally, we must speak of another theme which the poet has dealt with the close connection between joy and pain. Indeed the awareness of pain heightens the joys of life. Again, the taste of pleasure deepens the pains of life. Thus Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* may, be looked upon as consisting thus, not of a single theme but of a number of themes. Hence it may be regarded as 'a meditative reverie' in which the poet's searching consciousness broods over the philosophical problems of permanence of art and brevity of life, of illusion and reality, of pleasure and pain, of beauty and ugliness, and of escape and involvement.

Summary:

Stanza I

The poet experiences a pain in his heart and seems to be sleepy and powerless to feel or move as if he had taken hemlock or opium only a moment ago, and sunk deep into the river of forgetfulness. This feeling arises and because of his envy at the happy condition of the nightingale but because of his excessive joy in sharing its happiness. To the poet the bird appears to be a light-winged Dryad, a wood nymph (i.e., a beautiful goddess), singing of summer with ease and loudness from a plot of land full of green and shadowy beach trees.

Stanza II

To prolong the feeling of pain-like joy and the states of sleepiness and forgetfulness the poet wishes to have a mouthful of wine that has been cooled for a long time deep under a piece of ground serving as a silent witness (i) of festivities done in honour of Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, (ii) of village people dancing together, (iii) of songs of love and chivalry sung by troubadours (i.e., travelling poet-singers) in Provence, a Southern province of France known for its

vines and wine, and (iv) of mirth radiated by sunburnt people participating in outdoor games. The poet keenly longs for a goblet (i.e., a large drinking –cup) full of the genuine and red-glowing wine made of grapes ripened by the warm sunshine found in southern France and as inspiring as the crystal-clear water of Hippocrene, a fountain on Mount Helicon sacred to the Muses. The goblet should be such as to have bubbles of wine sparkling at the top and its mouth or edge dyed red with its colour. Such a drink will make the poet leave the world without being seen by anyone and help him melt in the air only to reach the side of the nightingale resting and singing in a dim grove of the forest.

Stanza III

The poet wishes to go to the happy world of the nightingale leaving the miserable world of man (i) where men in general are subjected to the weariness of the spirit, the relentless of the body, and the annoyance of the mind, (ii) where men sit helplessly and hear each other groan with misery, (iii) where a paralyzed old man sadly sits without movement, although his few last grey hairs shake in the air, (iv) where a young man grows pale and thin, and then dies permanently, (v) where a young and beautiful woman cannot keep the brightness of her eyes for long, and (vi) where a new lover grows so inconstant that he will now long for the bright eyes of his first sweet-heart beyond a very short period.

Stanza IV

The poet rejects the idea of wine, for now he does not like to be conveyed to the happy land of the nightingale, being seated on the leopard-driven chariot of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine. He rather wishes to go there with the help of the invisible wings of poetic fancy, though the pure reason confuses him and hinders the free play of his imagination. However, such is the magic power of imagination that the very next moment he is able to bring himself close to nightingale. He observes the night to be not yet advanced. He fancies that perhaps the queen Moon is seated on her throne, surrounded by her star-like fairies. There is no light in the grove except that which comes down from the sky and finds a way through the dark green vegetation and the zigzag forest paths-covered with moss when the blowing breeze creates gaps in them.

Stanza V

On account of the darkness the poet cannot see what flowers have bloomed below nor what sweet smelling blossoms have grown on the branches. But in the perfumed darkness he can guess each sweet flower and blossom with which the month of May decorates the grass, the bush, and the unnurtured fruit tree- the white hawthorn, the eglantine (i.e., a kind of wild rose) frequently mentioned in pastoral poetry, the quick fading violet almost hidden in its leaves, and the blooming musk-rose (the first to appear in the middle of May), full of dew and honey, and serving itself as a place frequently visited by humming bees on summer evenings.

Stanza VI

Sitting in the dark grove the poet listens to the song of the nightingale. He remembers that many a time he has almost loved painless death, and even composed in imagination many flattering verses in its honour, and entreated it to take away his breath quietly. But now death seems to him more welcome than ever before. He wishes to die a painless death at midnight whilst the bird will pour forth its soul in songs of extreme happiness. The bird will continue to sing but it will not reach his ears made insensitive by death. While the chanting of its song serving as high requiem (i.e., a prayer for the repose of the dead man's soul) will go on, he will, he fancies, he turned into a sod (i.e., a plot of earth growth with grass).

Stanza VII

The poet thinks that the nightingale is immortal; it is one not meant for death. It is exempt from the struggle for existence, for no 'hungry generation' press it down. The voice of the bird which he hears tonight was heard in ancient times by the king as well as the peasant-the rich as well as the poor. Possibly this very song went straight in the biblical times to the heart of Ruth (a young widow known for her devotion to her Jewish mother-in-law) who, being homesick, stood in tears while gathering corn in Bethlehem which was far away from Moab, her homeland. Perhaps this same song often cheered in medieval times the drooping heart of an imprisoned princess who sat by the open window of an enchanted castle of a fairy land (now utterly lost) to see whether any prince or knight would come to rescue her from there braving the foamy waves of a highly dangerous sea.

Stanza VIII

The word 'forlorn' (one meaning of which is 'lonely') brings the poet from the world of imagination to that of reality. He notices that fancy cannot sustain the romantic vision forgetting the facts of life for any length of time. He bids farewell to the mournful song of the nightingale which flies past the near meadow, crosses the quiet stream, moves up the hillside, and then becomes inaudible in the open spaces of the valley. The poet is not sure whether the song of the bird was a 'vision', a dream having some significance or potentiality or whether it was a 'waking dream', a mere day dream full of idle fancy and impracticability. He is not sure whether he is now in a wakeful state or whether he is in a state of sleepiness. What he is sure of is that the heavenly song of the nightingale has fled away from him.

Annotations

Stanza I

1. aches – to have a steady dull pain (The pain here springs not from sorrow but from excess of joy. Paradoxically it shows the limitations of sense of enjoyment. The inseparability, the close connection, of pleasure and pain is stressed here. Wordsworth has spoken of 'aching joys'. Both pleasure and pain are being highlighted here. The pain is a natural sequel of too much happiness.)

2. drowsy – sleepy

3. numbness – dullness or lethargy

4. hemlock – poisonous juice (by drinking this juice the Greek philosopher Socrates died) derived from a plant having clusters of white flowers. If it is used in small proportion, it produces dullness and sleep.

5. Lethe-wards- towards Lethe, the river of forgetfulness which was situated, according to Greek mythology, in Hades, the underworld. Those who drink of its water forget all about their past life. The word Lethe concretizes the sedation and repose which mark the speaker's state.

6. light-winged – fitted with light wings

7. Dryad- According to Greek mythology a nymph (i.e., a lesser goddess) living in trees. Each nymph had its own tree and died when the tree ceased to exist. The nightingale is compared to a wood nymph because such birds in England sing in the woods. Keats's Hellenic imagination naturally thinks of the bird as a Dryad with its wings not weighed down by the burden of life.

8. Melodious plot - a musical piece of ground. The plot is resounding with the song of the nightingale. It is an example of transferred epithet. Actually it is the bird, not the plot that is melodious. The plot, however, becomes so by its association with the bird. 'Melodious plot' is an instance of Keats's special type of image. The visual evokes the aural here, and the aural in turn evokes the visual. This is known as synesthesia. The function of this synaesthetic image is to show that numbness leads to a new awareness, a higher response in which modes of sensation are not limited to single appeal.

8. summer – song welcoming the summer, one of the pleasantest seasons of England.

According to Downer, the critic, in Stanza I we find “the familiar picture of the sweet songbird, sitting amidst the forest beeches, its throat distended, as though with effort, pouring forth its soul abroad; yet in reality with that restfulness and absence of strain which ever accompany the perfection of art”.

Stanza II

1. draught – drinking as much wine as possible at a single attempt

2. deep-helved – dug deep; buried in a deep place.

3. flora – the Roman goddess of flowers.

4. Provencal Song – song sung in Provence, a southern district of France along the Mediterranean, noted for its wines and for its being the birth place of French poetry. It refers to the song of love and chivalry, of the spring and the nightingale, chanted by the troubadours wandering poet-singers of Provence during the middle ages. It is to be noted that the Provencal language ceased to be used for literary purposes in the fourteenth century.

5. sunburnt mirth – mirth of people exposed more to the sun (and looking brown – skinned) because of their participation in open-air sports or dances. The epithet ‘sunburnt’ is transferred here from the people to their mirth.

6. beaker – properly a large cup with a lip. It refers to the goblet, the handle less drinking vessel.

7. Full of the warm South – full of wine prepared from grapes grown in the sunny southern parts of Europe, especially of France, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece.

8. blushful – of a glowing red colour; richly red. The red wine has been metaphorically used here as a beautiful red-lipped woman, wearing a necklace of beads and peeping through her window.

09. Hippocrene – a fountain on Mount Helicon (in Greece) sacred to the Muses (i.e., the nine goddess of poetry, music and the other liberal arts), and said to have been produced by the stroke of the hoof of the winged horse, Pegasus. All who drank from it were said to have gained inspiration.

10. winking – twinkling; sparkling

11. purple-stained mouth – mouth of the wine- cup looking red because of the redness of the wine. There is also the sensuous suggestion of a red- lipped dancing girl looking obliquely at her lover. The poet in anticipation imagines that he has already drunk of the wine and that his mouth is already purple with it. Keats’s rich sensuousness is observed in the whole stanza and is particularly noticeable here.

12. leave the world – Obviously the poet wants to escape from the society because of its worries and suffering. Here the escapist note is palpable.

13. forest dim – It refers to the shadowy grove which does not allow much light on account of the thick clusters of leaves. It is here that the nightingale has built its nest.

Stanza III

1. fade far away – escape to a distant place; go to the land of the nightingale which is far away. It appears to be a distant land either because of the obstacles which the poet will have to surmount before reaching his destination or because of its striking difference from the ugly, diseased and poor society where the poet dwells.

2. dissolve – The poet wishes to merge his identity into the world of natural things. He wishes to throw off the burden of consciousness. The very process of moving into the nightingale's world is described as a fading into nature.

3. What thou...never known – the sorrow and suffering of the human society is an unfortunate experience which the nightingale in its leafy region has never undergone.

4. The weariness, the fever, and the fret – the tiredness (of the spirit), the restlessness (of the body), and the vexation (of the mind).

5. fever – it means feverish activities undertaken to fulfil an ambition while 'fret' indicates disappointment

6. groan – under a deep sound of pain or distress. The sound is also indicative of despair.

7. palsy – paralysis

8. grey hairs – (i) hairs of grey colour, (ii) old men (Keats here draws a pathetic picture by showing the contrast inherent in the immutability of the body and the movement of the hairs)

9. Where youthand dies – where a young person loses his freshness, looks as thin as a ghost, and dies. Keats here refers to the death of his younger brother Tom in 1818. Keats here suggests the three stages of consumption-anemia, enunciation, and death.

10. Where but Of sorrow – where any exercise of thought is sure to lead to pessimism. The world is so full of misery that as soon as one reflects on life, one is filled with sorrow.

11. leaden-eyed despairs - despair makes one cast one's eyes downwards. Despair or loss of hope is personified here. It looks like a person on whose eyes as it were pieces of lead have been placed, and it cannot open its eyes because of the heaviness of the lead. Literally it means one's heart is heavy with sorrow.

12. beauty— a beautiful woman. The figure of speech used here is synecdoche – abstract ('beauty') for the concrete ('a beautiful woman'). Keats shows here that the beauty of a sweetheart is as momentary as the passion of a lover (who soon grows indifferent to his subject of love.) Here two of the most valuable possessions of life, Beauty and Love; have upon them the curse, the one of transience and the other of fickleness and inconstancy.

13. lusturous eyes- bright eyes; suggestive of youth and beauty

14. love- lover. The figure of speech employed here is synecdoche- 'abstract' ('love') for the concrete ('a lover'). Here beauty is transient as love is impermanent.

15. pine at – pine for; long for

16. them – the lustrous eyes of the beloved.

17. beyond tomorrow – not more than tomorrow; only for a short period. It points to a world 'where love can no more be firm and constant than beauty can be permanent'.

Stanza IV

1. Away! Away! – let the idea of going to the happy land of the nightingale with the help of wine go away. Repetition of the word 'away' expresses the intensity of rejection. The impatient opening also signals the agitation created by the sorrow of the human world and the bliss of the nightingale's world.

2. charioted – be driven on a carriage

3. Bacchus – in Roman the god of wine and revelry, identified with Dionysus whom the Romans took to be the fertility god associated with the wine. Bacchus, the god of wine, is represented in Roman mythology as riding in a chariot drawn by leopards. Here the poet does not want to reach the realm of the nightingale by

drinking wine; he has no desire to go there under the influence of an intoxicating drink.

4. viewless – invisible

5. Wings of poesy – poetic imagination (The use of such an old term is because of Spenser's influence on Keats.)

6. dull brain – the brain serving as the seat of uninteresting logic

7. retards – obstructs the poet's journey to the land of the nightingale

8. perplexes – confuses

9. Though the ...and retards – though the pure intellect or reason hinders the free play of imagination

10. Tender is the night – the night is not the far advanced; so darkness has not thickened yet.

11. haply – (archaic form) perhaps

12. clustered around – surrounded by

13. fairies – The stars are compared to fairies because of their association with Titania; queen of the fairies as well as the moon-goddess. In this line the moon is imagined as queen of the night with the stars as her attendant fairies.

14. here – in the grove of the nightingale. There is no light because of the thick layers of leaves. It is interesting to note that the poet composed it, while listening to a singing nightingale, after breakfast; hence he must be fancying here of a similar night-time experience.

15. heaven – the sky

16. blown – (here) brought in

17. verdurous gloom – green darkness; darkness prevailing in the green kingdom of trees

18. winding – not straight

19. mossy ways – ways covered with moss

20. what ... mossy ways – when the breeze blows, it removes the leaves on one side, and thereby creates gaps through which the light of the sky enters and reveals the green vegetation so long lying covered in darkness as well as the moss-covered paths of the forest.

Stanza V

1. at my feet – below my feet

2. soft – mildly scented

3. incense- flowers (It is because of its sweet smell a blossom is likened to incense, a material which exhales fragrant fumes.)

4. hangs - blooms

5. embalmed darkness – perfumed darkness; darkness rich with the smell of flowers. The word ‘embalmed’ in its verbal sense, besides meaning ‘to perfume’, also means ‘to anoint a body (to be interred soon into the grave) with fragrant chemicals and aromatic gums. The word ‘embalmed’ foreshadows the pre – occupation with death in the following stanza.

6. guess- conjecture

7. seasonable month – the month in its due season; appropriately or timely month. The month of May is favourable to the growth of various types of seasonal flowers. It refers to ‘the month that brings forth the flowers in their season’.

8. endows – enriches; blesses

9. thicket – bush; undergrowth; underwood

10. wild – wild fruit tree. The fruit tree that has grown in the wild, and not attended by man.

11. hawthorn – white blossom of the rose family

12. pastoral eglantine – honeysuckle or sweet briar (= a kind of rose with many prickles frequently mentioned in pastoral (= concerned with peaceful, lovely and contented rural life) poetry; sweet briar growing in the fields or countryside.
13. fast – fading violets – violets, bluish or light purple sweet smelling flowers, that wither away quickly
14. child – the first flower that blooms in early spring
15. musk-rose – fragrant species of rose
16. dewy wine – dew and honey; honey as clear as dew
17. murmurous haunt – haunt of murmurous bees; the musk – rose serving as a place
18. flies – here it is referred to bees
19. summer eves – summer evenings (On summer evenings the bees crowd together and hum gently round the musk – rose for its honey. The last line of this stanza is a fine example of onomatopoeia (i.e., a figure in which the sound echoes the sense). The last line according to Downer, “is a piece of word music; a line of beauty and delight”).

Stanza VI

1. darkling – in the dark;
2. half in love – to be almost in love with death (The desire for death is clear enough in ode. But the other half of his commitment remains with the complaint against sickness and mortality-against all that is not ideal and permanent. Half of his spirit seeks escape from pain and change; the other half yearns for immortality. Death appears attractive as it is but at the same time appears to be an obstacle to the desired union with the nightingale.)
3. easeful death – painless death; death that brings relief
4. called him soft names – tried to please death in a flattering way; tried to win favour from death by calling it as ‘great reliever’

5. In many a mused rhyme – in many rhymed verses contemplated but not actually written out

6. mused – thought out, but not actually executed

7. to take quite breath – to take his breath, (It may also refer to an ordinary or uneventful life, a sort of life in which no high drama has been enacted. It shows that Death has no more terrors for the poet.)

8. more than ever – more satisfying than any previous time (As the poet listens to the song of the nightingale in the enveloping darkness, he feels that this would be the perfect moment to achieve his previously felt wish to die.)

9. rich – satisfying; pleasant; to die at such an intense moment to achieve his previously felt wish to die. According to the poet, it is magnificent to die at such an intense moment of experience.

10. cease – to die; to stop living; to depart from the world in a gentle way (According to Graham Hough, the romantic poet's desire for death is not a longing for extinction, it is a desire to make happiness that he knows to be transient to last forever. And Keats is only half in love with easeful death-the other half of his consciousness knows well enough that this answer is only the negation of any possible answer. But art offers a type of permanence; and by a startling transformation in the seventh stanza the nightingale becomes a symbol of the artist and its song a symbol of art. Transitory human happiness is given permanence in a different sense by being embodied in art.)

11. upon the midnight – on the middle part of the night

12. pouring forth thy soul – expressing the innermost thoughts in a spontaneous way; singing in the fullness of heart.

13. abroad – over a wide area; far and wide

14. ecstasy – a state of excessive joy; a rapturous song

15. still – even after the supposed death of the poet

16. ears in vain – ears without the power of hearing (A dead man still possesses his ears, but they remain insensitive, and hence cannot receive or respond to sound

coming from outside. He was fully aware that to die would entail losing the very richness of the bird's world, and becoming deaf to its enchanting song.)

17. high requiem – a song of mourning; a high Mass (a ritual of the church for the rest of the soul of the dead) celebrated with incense, music, and considerable ceremony a dirge.

18. sod – a plot of land covered with grass; grassy soil surface; a surface of earth grown with grass; the grassy surface of his tomb. The bird will continue to sing even when he has been covered into a sod. This, thus, suggests the transitoriness of human life and the permanence of art.

Stanza VII

1. thou wast... immortal bird – a fine example of tautology, for 'not born for death' and 'immortal' mean the same thing. Man is so much encircled by pain and poverty, distress and disease that to the poet man rightly appears to be one born for death. Since the happy bird remains above all these ills of life and lives in a region of enchanting beauty and joy of the nightingale, to the poet's romantic fancy, seems to be one 'not born for death'.

2. immortal bird – deathless bird

3. hungry generations – generations of hungry people; people involved in the struggle for existence. The generations of mortal men, hungry for material gains, are ready to trample down what is more beautiful or durable.

4. tread – press down with the feet

5. no hungry generation... thee down – the nightingale is not subjected to the struggle for existence as men down through the generations are. No hungry generation of men can destroy the race of the nightingales. In the words of Robert Bridges, the famous poet explains it in a different way. His view is that the poet will die, and the succeeding generations of men will tread upon his memory. But when the nightingale dies, its song is taken up by the coming generations of nightingales for an infinite time. Thus the song of the nightingale symbolizes the eternal and the immortal as contrasted with the temporal and the mortal; it stands for permanence and immutability in the face of transience and mutability.

6. the voice – the sweet song of the nightingale
7. this passing night – the night which is departing hurriedly; the night which is surpassingly beautiful
8. by emperor and clown – the melodious voice of the nightingale was heard in old ages by the king and the rustic, the rich and the poor. It is to be noted that rhyme compelled Keats to use the word ‘clown’ in the rarely used sense of a rustic or country fellow in order that it may agree with the word ‘down’.
9. The self – same song – this very song; exactly the same song which the poet is listening at present
10. Found a path – went straight to the heart; found a way of entrance
11. Ruth – The Old Testament tells of Ruth, a Moabite widow, who after the death of her husband refused to desert her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi. Together they returned to Naomi’s home in Bethlehem. There Ruth later married Boaz, a wealthy kinsman. Ruth and Boaz are the ancestors of David (c. 1012-972 B.C.), one of the greatest kings of the Hebrews.
12. sick for home – homesickness, nostalgia. Ruth became mentally uneasy on account of her long absence from Moab; her birth-place.
13. She stood ... alien corn – while Ruth stood surrounded by the cornfields of Bethlehem, a foreign land to her, she felt so homesick and so much longed to return to her own native place Moab that tears glistened in her eyes.
14. alien corn – the corn fields of Bethlehem, a foreign land to Ruth; the barley fields of Boaz in Bethlehem which is far away from Moab, Ruth’s native place.
15. the same – the same song of Nightingale
16. charmed – enchanted; delighted; consoled; gladdened
17. Magic Casements – (the captive princess sitting behind) the windows of an enchanted castle
18. perilous – dangerous
19. Faery lands – legendary lands of romance; lands of the fairies

20. forlorn – utterly lost; remote; abandoned; neglected. Here Keats probably suggests that the development of science and materialism blasted the faith in fairies and such types of supernatural objects.

21. Charmed magic...lands forlorn – ‘the same song that often in days of old has unlocked magic casements which look out over the foam of perilous seas’ in fairy lands now utterly lost to men.

Stanza VIII

1. forlorn – lonely; forsaken. Mark that the meaning of the word has undergone a change here. In the last line of the previous stanza its meaning was ‘utterly lost’ or ‘remote’; here it means ‘lonely’ or ‘dreary’, ‘pathetic’ or ‘pitiable’.

2. The very ... sole self – the word ‘forlorn’, like the ringing of a bell whereby one’s attention is drawn to do a particular work, makes the poet aware of his long sojourn in the romantic world of nightingale, and reminds him to come back to his own world. As a result he withdraws himself from the bird’s world and returns to his lonely self.

3. adieu – farewell

4. fancy – imagination; the power to perceive of things which have no existence.

5. cheat– deceive (Imagination cannot make a man remain blind to reality for ever. Delusion cannot be a permanent feature.)

6. As she...to do – Imagination is reputed to have such power that it can put a man under pleasant illusion for long. However, now after his return to reality the poet is not willing to give credence to it.

7. elf – a wicked fairy, a supernatural being more malignant than a fairy. Here fancy is called a deceiving fairy, for its romantic spell cannot make a man forget the grim reality of life forever. The propriety of the use of the term ‘elf’ has been questioned.

8. plaintive anthem – mournful strain; sad song. The nightingale is proverbially known for its melancholy song. With the poet’s return to reality the taste of the bird’s song changes-it changes from a happy song to a melancholy one.

9. fades – grows faint; gradually dies away

10. meadows – grassy fields; rich pasture grounds. England is notable for such meadows.

11. buried deep – sunk deeply; lost fully; become inaudible

12. valley – glades – open spaces of the valley

13. vision – dream or similar trance – like state something seen, especially by the mind's eye or the power of imagination, or something seen during sleep or in a trance like state. A vision may occur when one is awake and in clear exercise of the senses and mental powers; vision is often applied to something seen by the mind..., whether in sleep or wakefulness, conceived as more real and authoritative than a dream. There is little difference between 'dream' and 'vision' except that 'the vision is thought of as fuller and more vivid'. By vision Keats is suggesting here a kind of dream that made him experience a happy and joyful world such as the nightingale's. It enabled him to give a permanent shape to it in the form of an art, in poetry, for example. Thus vision is not only delightful but also creative in nature.

14. Waking dream – day-dream; reverie. (Keats possibly used the term 'waking dream' in the sense of an idle fancy which is undirected, distracted from the present and is useless, impractical and purposeless.)

15. fled – gone; departed (Since the immortality of the bird or particularly its song is a mood-built one, it cannot, after the dissolution of the poet's mood, stand the touch of reality.

16. Was it ...or sleep? – As regards the poet's predicament

17. Do I wake or sleep? – The word 'forlorn' brings the poet, all of a sudden from the land of imagination to the land of reality as a result of which he finds himself in a dazed state. He is not fully sure whether he is now awake or asleep, so fresh and pervasive is the impression of the nightingale and so powerful and influential is the sense of reality upon him. Though the music of the nightingale has disappeared, the poet seems to be haunted by its melody 'long after it was heard no more'. At the same time reality opens its flood –gates upon him. The question 'Do I wake or

sleep?’ also marks the uncertainty of the poet to come to a decision about the comparative merit of reality and illusion, of participation in the actualities of life and the recreative experience with the aid of imagination. He cannot decide which will be the right course for him-denial of reality or denial of imagination. This is echoed in the following extract of Miriam Allott : “ Keats is left wondering which has the greater truth- the happiness of romantic reverie or the colder experience of everyday reality”.

Short Questions:

Q1. How does Keats describe his aching condition at the beginning of his poem *Ode to a Nightingale*?

Q2. What has brought about his aching condition?

Q3. In what condition does the poet see the nightingale?

Q4. ‘O, for a draught of vintage!’ What kind of ‘vintage’ does the poet long for?

Q5. ‘O for a beaker’. What kind of beaker does the poet long for?

Q6. How does the poet wish to leave the world?

Q7. What makes the poet to resolve to ‘fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget’?

Q8. How has Keats drawn the human world of sorrow?

Q9. How does the poet propose to join the world of the nightingale?

Q10. How has Keats depicted the world of the nightingale?

Q11. Describe the effect of the poet’s guessing ‘each sweet’ in the ‘embalmed darkness’.

Q12. Why is the poet seized with the idea of death?

Q13. ‘Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!’ Why does the poet say so?

Q14. How does the poet desire to ‘cease from living’?

Q15. ‘The voice I hear this passing night was heard/In ancient times’...What does the poet put forward in support of his claim?

Q16. Why does poet finally bid adieu to the poetic fancy that once helped him to reach the land of the nightingale?

Q17. How does the poet describe the fading away of the 'plaintive anthem'?

Q18. 'Was it a vision, or a waking dream?' What does it purport to say?

Q19. 'Do I wake or sleep?' What do the words mean to say?

Q20. What is the significance of the word 'forlorn' in the last stanza?

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