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Ode to a Nightingale

John Keats (1795-1821)

Keats...thoughts on the Imagination

- “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination”
- “My imagination is a monastery and I am its monk”
- “What the imagination seizes as beauty must be the truth”



Form and Structure

- Keats and his Romantic peers almost single-handedly revived the ode form for modern readers with poems like
- The ode is an Ancient Greek song performed at formal occasions, usually in praise of its subject.
- "Ode to a Nightingale" is a particular kind of ode – a Horatian ode, after the Roman poet Horace. In general, a Horatian ode has a consistent stanza length and metre.
- "Ode to a Nightingale" is notable for being the longest of Keats's six "Great Odes." It is also often considered the most personal, with its reflections on death and the stresses of life.
- The poem has eight separate stanzas of ten lines each, and the metre of each line in the stanza, except for the eighth, is iambic pentametre. The eighth line is written in iambic trimetre which means it has only three stresses in the line, not five.

<http://www.shmoop.com/ode-nightingale/rhyme-form-meter.html>

Romantic Odes

- There are usually three elements in a Romantic Ode:
 - the description of a particularised outer natural scene;
 - an extended meditation, which the scene stimulates, and which may be focused on a private problem or a universal situation or both;
 - the occurrence of an insight or vision, a resolution or decision, which signals a return to the scene originally described, but with a new perspective created by the intervening meditation.

Stanza I Group A

- As you read, pick out which words express his pleasure and which ones express his pain and which words express his intense feeling and which his numbed feeling.
- Consider whether pleasure can be so intense that, paradoxically, it either numbs us or causes pain.
- What qualities does the poet ascribe to the nightingale?

Stanza II Group B

- Think about the effects alcohol has; which one or ones is the poet seeking?
- Since his goal is to join the bird, what quality or qualities of the bird does he want to experience? How might alcohol enable him to achieve that desire?
- Does the wine resemble the nightingale in being associated with summer, song, and happiness?

Stanza III Group C

- Does thinking of the human condition intensify, diminish, or have no effect on the poet's desire to escape the world?
- What is the relationship of the bird to the world the poet describes?
- By implication, what kind of world does the nightingale live in? (Is it the same as or different from the poet's?)

Stanza IV Group D

- In choosing Poesy, is he calling on analytical or scientific reasoning, on poetry and imagination, on passion, on sensuality, or on something else?
- The imagined world described in the rest of the stanza is dark; what qualities are associated with this darkness, e.g., is it frightening, safe, attractive, empty, fulfilling, sensuous, alive?

Stanza V Group A

- The imagined world described in the rest of the stanza is dark; what qualities are associated with this darkness, e.g., is it frightening, safe, attractive, empty, fulfilling, sensuous, alive?
- Even in this refuge, death is present; what words hint of death?
- In the progression of the seasons, what changes occur between spring and summer? how do they differ (as, for instance, autumn brings fulfillment, harvest, and the beginning of decay which becomes death in winter)? Why might Keats leap to thoughts of the summer to come?

Stanza VI Group B

- Is there any suggestion of the bird's dying or experiencing anything but bliss? Note the contrast between the bird's singing and the poet's hearing that song.
- What are the emotional effects of or associations with "high requiem" and "sod"? Why does Keats now hear the bird's song as a requiem?
- Is there any irony in Keats's using the same word to describe both the nightingale and death--the bird sings with "full-throated ease" at the end of stanza I and death is "easeful" (line 2 of this stanza)?

Stanza VII Group C

- Explain the meaning of the word “immortal”.
- What ideas or aspects of human life do the references to ancient days and the biblical allusions represent?
- Does bringing up the idea of pain prepare us or help to prepare us for the final stanza?

Stanza VIII Group D

- The persona repeats the word "forlorn" from the end of stanza VII; who or what is now forlorn? Is the poet identified with or separate from the nightingale?
- What delusion is the poet awakening from?
- Is there change in the bird, in the poet, or in both?
- What is the persona questioning at the end of the poem?
- In what ways has the persona changed?
- Think about the tone at the end of the poem.



THANK YOU ALL