

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.

Themes

The Inevitability of Death

Even before his diagnosis of terminal tuberculosis, Keats focused on death and its inevitability in his work. For Keats, small, slow acts of death occurred every day, and he chronicled these small mortal occurrences. The end of a lover's embrace, the images on an ancient urn, the reaping of grain in autumn—all of these are not only symbols of death, but instances of it. Examples of great beauty and art also caused Keats to ponder mortality, as in "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" (1817). As a writer, Keats hoped he would live long enough to achieve his poetic dream of becoming as great as Shakespeare or John Milton: in "Sleep and Poetry" (1817), Keats outlined a plan of poetic achievement that required him to read poetry for a decade in order to understand—and surpass—the work of his predecessors. Hovering near this dream, however, was a morbid sense that death might intervene and terminate his projects; he expresses these concerns in the mournful 1818 **sonnet** "When I have fears that I may cease to be."

The Contemplation of Beauty

In his poetry, Keats proposed the contemplation of beauty as a way of delaying the inevitability of death. Although we must die eventually, we can choose to spend our time alive in aesthetic revelry, looking at beautiful objects and landscapes. Keats's **speakers** contemplate urns ("Ode on a Grecian Urn"), books ("On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" [1816], "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" [1818]), birds ("Ode to a Nightingale"), and stars ("Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art" [1819]). Unlike mortal beings, beautiful things will never die but will keep demonstrating their beauty for all time. Keats explores this idea in the first book of *Endymion* (1818). The speaker in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" envies the immortality of the lute players and trees inscribed on the ancient vessel because they shall never cease playing their songs, nor will they ever shed their leaves. He reassures young lovers by telling them that even though they shall never catch their mistresses, these women shall always stay beautiful. The people on the urn, unlike the speaker, shall never stop having experiences. They shall remain permanently depicted while the speaker changes, grows old, and eventually dies.

Motifs

Departures and Reveries

In many of Keats's poems, the speaker leaves the real world to explore a transcendent, mythical, or aesthetic realm. At the end of the poem, the speaker returns to his ordinary life transformed in some way and armed with a new understanding. Often the appearance or contemplation of a beautiful object makes the departure possible. The ability to get lost in a reverie, to depart conscious life for imaginative life without wondering about plausibility or rationality, is part of Keats's concept of negative capability. In "Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art," the speaker imagines a state of "sweet unrest" (12) in which he will remain half-conscious on his lover's breast forever. As speakers depart this world for an

imaginative world, they have experiences and insights that they can then impart into poetry once they've returned to conscious life. Keats explored the relationship between visions and poetry in "Ode to Psyche" and "Ode to a Nightingale." 

The Five Senses and Art

Keats imagined that the five senses loosely corresponded to and connected with various types of art. The speaker in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" describes the pictures depicted on the urn, including lovers chasing one another, musicians playing instruments, and a virginal maiden holding still. All the figures remain motionless, held fast and permanent by their depiction on the sides of the urn, and they cannot touch one another, even though we can touch them by holding the vessel. Although the poem associates sight and sound, because we see the musicians playing, we cannot hear the music. Similarly, the speaker in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" compares hearing Homer's words to "pure serene" (7) air so that reading, or seeing, becomes associating with breathing, or smelling. In "Ode to a Nightingale," the speaker longs for a drink of crystal-clear water or wine so that he might adequately describe the sounds of the bird singing nearby. Each of the five senses must be involved in worthwhile experiences, which, in turn, lead to the production of worthwhile art.

The Disappearance of the Poet and the Speaker

In Keats's theory of negative capability, the poet disappears from the work—that is, the work itself chronicles an experience in such a way that the reader recognizes and responds to the experience without requiring the intervention or explanation of the poet. Keats's speakers become so enraptured with an object that they erase themselves and their thoughts from their depiction of that object. In essence, the speaker/poet becomes melded to and indistinguishable from the object being described. For instance, the speaker of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" describes the scenes on the urn for several stanzas until the famous conclusion about beauty and truth, which is enclosed in quotation marks. Since the poem's publication in 1820, critics have theorized about who speaks these lines, whether the poet, the speaker, the urn, or one or all the figures on the urn. The erasure of the speaker and the poet is so complete in this particular poem that the quoted lines are jarring and troubling.

Symbols

Music and Musicians

Music and musicians appear throughout Keats's work as **symbols** of poetry and poets. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," for instance, the speaker describes musicians playing their pipes. Although we cannot literally hear their music, by using our imaginations, we can imagine and thus hear music. The speaker of "To Autumn" reassures us that the season of fall, like spring, has songs to sing. Fall, the season of changing leaves and decay, is as worthy of poetry as spring, the season of flowers and rejuvenation. "Ode to a Nightingale" uses the bird's music to contrast the mortality of humans with the immortality of art. Caught up in beautiful birdsong, the speaker imagines himself capable of using poetry to join the bird in the forest. The beauty of the bird's music represents the ecstatic, imaginative possibilities of poetry. As mortal beings who will eventually die, we can delay death through the timelessness of music, poetry, and other types of art.

Nature

Like his fellow romantic poets, Keats found in nature endless sources of poetic inspiration, and he described the natural world with precision and care. Observing elements of nature allowed Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, among others, to create extended meditations and thoughtful odes about aspects of the human condition. For example, in "Ode to a Nightingale," hearing the bird's song

causes the speaker to ruminate on the immortality of art and the mortality of humans. The speaker of “Ode on Melancholy” compares a bout of depression to a “weeping cloud” (12), then goes on to list specific flowers that are linked to sadness. He finds in nature apt images for his psychological state. In “Ode to Psyche,” the speaker mines the night sky to find ways to worship the Roman goddess Psyche as a muse: a star becomes an “amorous glow-worm” (27), and the moon rests amid a background of dark blue. Keats not only uses nature as a springboard from which to ponder, but he also discovers in nature **similes**, symbols, and **metaphors** for the spiritual and emotional states he seeks to describe.

The Ancient World

Keats had an enduring interest in antiquity and the ancient world. His longer poems, such as *The Fall of Hyperion* or *Lamia*, often take place in a mythical world not unlike that of classical antiquity. He borrowed figures from ancient mythology to populate poems, such as “Ode to Psyche” and “To Homer” (1818). For Keats, ancient myth and antique objects, such as the Grecian urn, have a permanence and solidity that contrasts with the fleeting, temporary nature of life. In ancient cultures, Keats saw the possibility of permanent artistic achievement: if an urn still spoke to someone several centuries after its creation, there was hope that a poem or artistic object from Keats’s time might continue to speak to readers or observers after the death of Keats or another writer or creator. This achievement was one of Keats’s great hopes. In an 1818 letter to his brother George, Keats quietly prophesied: “I think I shall be among the English poets after my death.”

Ode to Psyche



Summary

Keats’s speaker opens the poem with an address to the goddess Psyche, urging her to hear his words, and asking that she forgive him for singing to her her own secrets. He says that while wandering through the forest that very day, he stumbled upon “two fair creatures” lying side by side in the grass, beneath a “whisp’ring roof” of leaves, surrounded by flowers. They embraced one another with both their arms and wings, and though their lips did not touch, they were close to one another and ready “past kisses to outnumber.” The speaker says he knew the winged boy, but asks who the girl was. He answers his own question: She was Psyche.

In the second stanza, the speaker addresses Psyche again, describing her as the youngest and most beautiful of all the Olympian gods and goddesses. He believes this, he says, despite the fact that, unlike other divinities, Psyche has none of the trappings of worship: She has no temples, no altars, no choir to sing for her, and so on. In the third stanza, the speaker attributes this lack to Psyche’s youth; she has come into the world too late for “antique vows” and the “fond believing lyre.” But the speaker says that even in the fallen days of his own time, he would like to pay homage to Psyche and become her choir, her music, and her oracle. In the fourth stanza, he continues with these declarations, saying he will become Psyche’s priest and build her a temple in an “untrodden region” of his own mind, a region surrounded by thought that resemble the beauty of nature and tended by “the gardener Fancy,” or imagination. He promises Psyche “all soft delight” and says that the window of her new abode will be left open at night, so that her winged boy—“the warm Love”—can come in.

Form

The four stanzas of “Ode to Psyche” are written in the loosest form of any of Keats’s odes. The stanzas vary in number of lines, rhyme scheme, and metrical scheme, and convey the effect of spontaneous rhapsody rather than considered form. Lines are iambic, but vary from dimeter to pentameter; the most



common rhymes are in alternating lines (ABAB), but there are abundant exceptions, and there are even unrhymed lines. (“Hours,” at the end of line ten in the third stanza, is an example.) The number of lines in a stanza is simply organic and irregular; stanza one has 23 lines, stanza two has 12, stanza three has 14, and stanza four has 18.

In the first stanza, every line is written in iambic pentameter except lines 12, 21, and 23 (the first two are trimeter, the last dimeter). The full rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFGEEGH IIIJ KIKI. It can essentially be broken into five parts: two pairs of four-line, alternating rhymes (ABAB CDCD), a looser seven-line sequence that includes rhythmic irregularity and two unrhymed words (EFGEEGH, with the trimeter in line 12 and the unrhymed words “roof” at the end of line 10 and “grass” at the end of line 15), two couplets (IIIJ), and a final four-line section with alternating rhymes (KIKI), differing from the first in that the “I” rhyme-lines (which match the rhymes of the first couplet above) are shorter than the “K” lines, with the trimeter of line 21 and the dimeter of line 23. (This sounds far more complicated than it is; penciling in the letters at the end of each line will make the scheme much easier to follow.)

The second stanza is shorter and much simpler. It follows a strictly alternating rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD EFEF, and the only irregularities are metrical, with two trimeters, lines 6 and 8. The result is that the CDCD section of this stanza differs slightly from the others; the D-lines are shorter. The third stanza has trimeters in lines 10, 12, and 14; other than that, the stanza is written in iambic pentameter. Its rhyme scheme is ABAB CDDCEF GHGH. This is relatively self-explanatory, except that “moan” and “hours,” the E- and F-lines (lines 9 and 10) do not have precise matches; “moan” rhymes roughly with “fans” and “Olympians,” and “hours” rhymes roughly with “vows” and “boughs,” but neither of these matches is as precise as the other rhymes in the stanza. If those rhymes “count,” the rhyme scheme of the stanza should be written as ABAB CDDCDA EFEF.

The final stanza has trimeters in lines 16 and 18, and follows a relatively simple and natural rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD EE FGFG HIHI. In other words, each section is four lines long and alternates rhyming lines, except for the EE couplet in lines 9 and 10.

It is very important to note that the large number of irregularities and long algebraic rhyme schemes in this ode should not be taken as signs of great formal complexity. “Ode to Psyche” is much more freely and loosely written than any of Keats’s other odes, and the fact that it is difficult to schematize testifies to this spontaneity and freedom rather than to an elaborate preconceived formal scheme. The other odes, though their stanzas and rhyme schemes are easier to describe in terms of form, are much more strictly ordered and make much deeper use of strict form than does the “Ode to Psyche.” In fact, there is little to gain from long formal analysis of the Psyche ode; its form is better understood in the loose and general terms in which it seems to have been planned.

Themes

With its loose, rhapsodic formal structure and its extremely lush sensual imagery, the “Ode to Psyche” finds the speaker turning from the delights of numbness (in “Ode on Indolence”) to the delights of the creative imagination—even if that imagination is not yet projected outward into art.

The basis for the story of “Ode to Psyche” is a famous myth. Psyche was the youngest and most beautiful daughter of a king. She was so beautiful that Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, was jealous of her; she dispatched her son, Eros, the god of love (the Cupid of Roman mythology and the “winged boy” of Keats’s poem) to punish Psyche for being so beautiful. But Eros was so startled by Psyche’s beauty that he pricked himself with his own arrow and fell in love with her. Eros summoned Psyche to his palace, but he remained invisible to her, coming to her only at night and ordering her never to try to see his face. One night, Psyche lit a lamp in order to catch a glimpse of her lover; but Eros

was so angry with her for breaking his trust that he left her. Psyche was forced to perform a number of difficult tasks to placate Venus and win back Eros as her husband. The word “psyche” is Greek for “soul,” and it is not difficult to imagine why Keats would have found the story attractive—the story of the woman so beautiful that Love fell in love with her.

Additionally, as Keats observed, the myth of Psyche was first recorded by Apuleius in the second century A.D., and is thus much more recent than most myths (this is why Keats refers to Psyche as the “latest born” of “Olympus’s faded hierarchy”). It is so recent, in fact, that Psyche was never worshipped as a real goddess. That slight is what compels Keats’s speaker to dedicate himself to becoming her temple, her priest, and her prophet, all in one. So he has found a way to move beyond the numbness of indolence and has discovered a goddess to worship. To worship Psyche, Keats summons all the resources of his imagination. He will give to Psyche a region of his mind, where his thoughts will transform into the sumptuous natural beauties Keats imagines will attract Psyche to her bower in his mind. Taken by itself, “Ode to Psyche” is simply a song to love and the creative imagination; in the full context of the odes, it represents a crucial step between “Ode on Indolence” and “Ode to a Nightingale”: the speaker has become preoccupied with creativity, but his imagination is still directed toward wholly internal ends. He wants to partake of divine permanence by taking his goddess into himself; he has not yet become interested in the outward imaginative expression of art.

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.

