

Chapter 19

Ode to a Nightingale

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Understanding the Poem

1. How does the nightingale's song plunge the poet into a state of ecstasy?

Answer

When Keats was sitting under a plum tree in the garden of his house, in Hampstead, he composed this poem. He was inspired by Nightingale's song and completed the poem within one day. The poet begins the poem in a melancholic mood and disparagingly expresses how his "heart aches" as if he is poisoned or is drugged. He felt as if he drank Lethe's water and was drowsy. Then it is revealed that actually it is the nearby bird, the Nightingale's song which is the reason of the poet's happiness. The poet addresses the Nightingale that he is happy in the bird's happiness.

2. What are the unpleasant aspects of the human condition that the poet wants to escape from?

Answer

While the poet is celebrating his new found happiness in the nightingale's song, he is thrown into much deeper thought. Keats commiserates with the human for the sorrow and all the unpleasantness that one has to go through in one's life. The poet wishes to escape from all these. He wishes to fly away to the bird and drown himself in the ecstasy of its humming. Keats realises the truth of human life. He renounces and learn that this world can serve nothing more than momentary pleasures to humans and rest all is sham and has pain. All the materialistic gains have pain rooted in them and he wants to break free from them. He lists out various such intricacies and obstacles. He tells the bird, who has never experienced fever, weariness, fret; who never sits like men and groans while palsy shakes a few, those sad folks with those last few gray hair. How youth fades and grows pale, thin and dies with time. He grieves for this world where nothing is permanent.

The poet wishes to escape from all these aspects of our physical world and wants to see the other world where true happiness lies, where the spiritual bliss awaits him.

3. What quality of 'beauty' and 'love' does the poem highlight?

Answer

Romantics share a reverence for nature's beauty and find solace in her embrace. In his poem, Ode to a Nightingale, Keats realises the ultimate truth, which is death. To fight this inevitability, he celebrates the beauty of nature, in which he finds beauty through the bird's song. However, we all must die. The poet travels a journey from mortality to immortality. Keats relishes the song of the immortal nightingale and feels ecstatic. The realisation dawns upon the poet that the beauty is not what we see but it lies within. And the beauty that he dwells on is of the nature and it helps him to delay the ultimate, the death! However, he must die. This beauty of the bird's song, the nature shall always be there, though the speaker will grow old and die one day. It is to be realised that the true beauty and happiness lies in the spiritual awakening and not in this materialistic world. Nothing is permanent in this world full of momentary pleasures, neither beauty nor love.

4. How does the poet bring out the immortality of the bird?

Answer

While the poet is grieving on the unpleasant aspects of human life, he cherishes the nightingale's song and feels elated and finds peace in it. He praises the beauty of it. He calls the bird immortal for its humming is not to fade away like humans wither with age and death. He wishes to fly to the nightingale, wants to die and live with the bird. However, Keats soon realises that what he imagines is impossible. Keats is bewitched by nightingale's singing and he sings in praise of this bird whose ageless humming has been heard by the emperors and clowns and even Ruth and by all since times immemorial and will be there to be heard by posterity. Spellbound, he further embellishes and adds the beauty to the bird's song by his personification. Enchanted by the evergreen beauty of the sound of this bird, Keats delays the inevitability of death and lives the immortality of the bird, though not for long.

5. How does the poet tossed back from ecstasy into despair?

Answer

While Keats praises the bird's song, the nightingale flies further away from him. The poet sighs, "Forlorn!" As the sound is distanced, the spell breaks and Keats awakens to the reality. He realises that while dreaming he had travelled far from reality. He is thrown back to the physical world again and he grieves that his imagination is not to become reality. Keats laments at the loss and wonders whether he was dreaming or he envisioned it all. He bemoans for he is bereft of his art and the beauty.

6. How does the poem bring out the elusive nature of happiness in human existence?

Answer

The poem is an attempt to distinct happiness and true happiness, the real and imaginary, reality and dream, the pleasure and pain, the ideal and the actual as Richard Fogle calls it. The everlasting and the momentary have been differentiated in the poem. The true pleasure as Keats defines lies not in the physical world which is full of miseries and pain and loss. We chase the beauty and happiness the way the poet chases the bird's song and still at a point the spell is bound to break like a bubble bursts and the human is thrown into the reality to realise the ultimate and inevitable, the death! Happiness is elusive and evanescent and can not be held for ever. It is fickle and promiscuous. The poet when felt that he has found the true happiness in the singing of the nightingale, which is beyond age and time; he wakes up to the reality. He realises that it was just a vision a dream, so is happiness, like a dream, not stationary! All that we can do is delay the inevitability of death through this beauty that gives transcendental happiness.