

FLAMINGO: A THING OF BEAUTY

JOHN KEATS

A Thing of Beauty is a poem written by the famous romantic poet, **John Keats**. The poem tells about how nature and its wonder mesmerize us and take away all the sorrow that surrounds us from time to time. This poem is an excerpt from Keats' poem 'Endymion'. The poem is based on a classical Greek myth of the love of the Moon Goddess Cynthia, for a young shepherd prince, Endymion. His poem makes use of allegory to signify the quest of the human soul for ideal Beauty. (**Allegory** is a demonstrative form of representation explaining meaning other than the words that are spoken. Allegory communicates its message by means of symbolic figures, actions or symbolic representation.) Endymion stands for the poet as a man, Cynthia for ideal Beauty, the Moon for the manifestations of the Beauty in Nature.

Theme: The theme of the poem rests in the opening line of the poem. A beautiful object is treasured in our mind because it provides us eternal and everlasting joy. This happiness never fades into nothingness but multiplies manifold whenever it flashes on our mind.

Background: Endymion is an epic poem in English. This poem by Keats is based on the Greek mythology of Endymion, the shepherd beloved by the moon goddess Selene. We see an elaboration of the original story and the moon Goddess Selene is named as "Cynthia". The poem equates Endymion's original romantic ardor with a more universal quest for a self-destroying transcendence in which he might achieve a blissful personal unity with all creation. Endymion in Greek mythology is a story of a handsome youth who spent much of his life sleeping. There are different views related to Endymion. According to some tradition Endymion was the king of Elis. Several traditions say that he was offered by Zeus to choose anything he might desire and Endymion in order to remain young forever chose an everlasting sleep. While some tradition says Endymion's eternal sleep was a punishment given by Zeus, because Endymion fell in love with Zeus's wife Hera. Selene was deeply in love with Endymion, some say Selene had cursed Endymion into everlasting sleep so that she can enjoy him all by herself. Selene's love for Endymion made her visit him every night while he was asleep. But in the poem Keats emphasizes on Endymion's love for Diana rather than on hers for him. Keats transformed this tale into prose to express the loves that have been felt on imaginative longings. This theme of love is determined in the adventure of the Endymion quest by Diana. In the search for Diana, Endymion falls in love with an earthly maiden. But in the end Diana and the earthly maiden turn out to be one and the same.

Poem: Keats describes a thing of beauty as emanating joy forever. Its beauty only increases and it will never cease. The benefits proffered by a thing of beauty are listed as giving sound rest with good dreams and well-being. The earth minus the beautiful things is a despondent, spiteful place thriving in callous insensitive dearth and is harsh toward human beings. Every day human beings face gloomy days packed with unhealthy spite and darkness. However, in spite of all, a thing of beauty helps remove the dark cloud that burdens our souls. Hence, the poet says that we – human beings – each day create an ornate band, made of all the lovely things we see. This band keeps us bound to the despondent earth – as we would otherwise be hopeless.

This closing paragraph simply tells us some of the beautiful things on Earth. After all, beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder – Everyone can highlight something beautiful in anything. The examples cited by the poet are as such: the sun, the moon, trees, flowers, streams, musk-rose blooms, architectural sepulchers, even fairy tales or heroic legends. The '*simple sheep*' are human beings –

the poet sympathizes with the innocence of human beings. Keats sees the beauty in innocent humans seeking solace in nature, and Mother Nature in its own way sprouts a shady abode of relief and consolation. The expression 'Lily of the valley' is quite well known and rouses images of a delicate lone white flower holding up its head amidst a setting of thorns and barbs and everything contrary in nature to delicateness – so too are the daffodils mentioned in the poem. The poet also sees beauty in the death of martyrs and legends. '*The mighty dead*' are those martyrs who have died bravely for a cause. We honor them by erecting magnificent, grand sepulchers in which beauty is seen. If one looks around, there are innumerable beautiful things to notice – they seem to flow immortally as a fountain, from the gods above to help the pitiable human beings to cope with the harshness of life.

Explanation Lines 1-5: "A thing of beauty is a joyquiet breathing". According to the poet, John Keats, a thing of beauty is a source of constant joy. Its beauty goes on increasing. It will never fade and pass into nothingness. A bower is a peaceful and pleasant place in the shade of a tree. It provides shelter or protection from the hot rays of the sun. A beautiful thing also gives us sound sleep, full of pleasant dreams, health and peaceful breathing. Beauty, hence does not lead to inertia but a constant battle to guard our nature/earth.

Explain Lines 6-13: "Therefore, on every morrow ...yes, in spite of all," As a result of this every morning we are weaving a flowery wreath to bind us to the beauties of the earth despite the sadness and the feeling of depression. We all possess evil qualities of hatred and disappointment. We suffer from lack of noble qualities and unhealthy evil ways. In spite of all this a beautiful thing helps to remove the cover of gloom or darkness from our lives. It makes us love life despite the things that make us sad and dampen our spirits.

Explain Lines 14-20: "Such the sun, the moon..... musk-rose blooms" The sun, the moon, trees old and young are all sources of happiness for us. The trees sprout and spread their branches to provide shelter within their green covering for the simple sheep. The daffodils bloom within the green surroundings in which they grow. The clear and small streams of water make a cooling shelter for themselves against the hot season. The thick mass of ferns looks grand with their beautiful musk roses.

Explain Lines 21-25: "And such too is the grandeur the heaven's brink". The mighty dead people whose achievements made them great and powerful inspire us through their sagas of their noble works. Their legends and stories enthuse us and we imagine their magnificence. A beautiful thing is also a source of joy just as the lovely tales we have heard or read give us profound happiness. A fountain of immortality pours its sacred and immortal drink into the heart and soul of man. This immortal drink gushing out from nature's endless fountain is a source of immense joy for us.

Understanding the Text: A beautiful thing is a source of eternal joy, its attractiveness grows with the passage of time and its impact never fades away. It is as pleasant as a cool quiet bower or sound sleep with sweet dreams; or robust health and mental peace. It provides the beholder with a haven of tranquility and solace.

It is the beauty of nature that keeps us attached to this earth. Every morning we collect fresh lovely flowers and prepare garlands. The fascination for flowers is our bonding with the earth. It helps us steer clear of despondency and disappointments. We forget all our despair, of acute shortage of noble souls, of misfortunes that overtake us to test our forbearance. Life is full of trials and tribulations and we often find ourselves in the midst of gloom. It is at such depressing moments that a sight full of beauty dispels the pall of sadness from our spirits making room for hope and optimism.

The objects of beauty are countless. These include heavenly bodies like the sun and the moon, the old and young trees that provide cool shelter to sleep, the daffodil flowers encased in green leaves, the streams that flow through a shady passage which they make themselves with plants, and the bushes that bear fragrant flowers. These simple and even commonplace things lift the human spirit filling it with joy and delight. In addition to these objects of nature, there are wonderful tales of our legendary heroes, who lived and died heroically, which inspire us with their matchless beauty. These beautiful things are metaphorically an endless source of nectar that pours down to us from heaven bringing eternal joy for the soul's grandeur. They are like an elixir of life, a never diminishing source of pleasure and delight, an endless fountain of joy that seems to be a precious gift from Heaven.

Reference to Context: Read the given lines and answer the questions that follow:

1) A thing of beauty is a joy forever
Its loveliness increases, it will never
Pass into nothingness; but will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

- a) Name the poem and the poet.
- b) How is a thing of beauty a joy forever?
- c) What do you understand by a 'bower'?
- d) What kind of a sleep does it provide?

ANS:(a) The poem is 'A Thing of Beauty' and the poet is John Keats.

(b) A thing of beauty provides everlasting joy. Its beauty never decreases but continues to increase with the passage of time. It never fades away.

(c) 'Bower' is the shelter under the shade of trees. It provides protection from the harsh rays of the sun.

(d) It provides a sound sleep, full of sweet dreams, health and peaceful breathing.

2) Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,

- a) What are we doing every day?
- b) Which evil things do we possess and suffer from?
- c) Explain 'in spite of all'.
- d) Find words from the passage which mean
 - i) Malice
 - ii) Disappointment

ANS: (a) Every morning, we are weaving a flowery wreath which binds us to the beauties of the earth.

(b) Human beings possess qualities of malice, hatred and disappointment. There is a shortage of noble qualities and men continue to be evil and unhealthy.

(c) In spite of all evils mentioned by the poet.

(d) i) Spite; ii) Despondence

3) Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old, and young, sprouting a shady boon.
For simple sheep;

- a) What removes the pall from our dark spirits?
- b) What sprouts a shady boon for sheep and how?
- c) Find words from the passage that mean
 - i) Covering, ii) Blessing,
- d) Name the poem and the poet.

ANS: (a) A thing of beauty removes the pall from our dark spirits.

(b) The old and young trees sprout branches to provide shade and shelter to sheep. It is a blessing for the sheep against the harsh sun.

(c) i) Pall; ii) Boon

(d) The poem is 'A Thing of Beauty' and the poet is 'John Keats'.

- 4) . . .and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms;
- a) How do 'daffodils' and 'rills' enrich the environment?
 - b) What makes the mid forest brake rich?
 - c) Find words in the passage which mean:
 - i) Small streams, ii) Shelter of thickets,
 - d) Cooling covert is a:
 - i) Simile, ii) Metaphor, iii) Personification, iv) Alliteration

ANS: (a) The daffodils bloom and are surrounded by the green surroundings. The clear streams of water create a cooling shelter for themselves against the heat of the sun.

(b) The beautiful musk-roses help to make the beautiful forest rich in beauty.

(c) i) Clear 'rills'; ii) Covert

(d) Alliteration

- 5) And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read;
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink
- a) Explain 'the grandeur of the doom'.
 - b) What is implied by 'all lovely tales that we have heard or read'?
 - c) What is the source of the 'endless fountain of immortal drink'?

ANS: (a) The magnificence that we associate with our ancestors and the beautiful things created by them.

(b) All the beautiful stories that have been read or heard by us are also surpassed in beauty by the beauties of nature.

(c) The source of the endless fountain of immortal drink is 'the brink of heaven'.

Short Answer Questions:

(Q.) List the things of beauty mentioned in the poem.

(Ans): The things of beauty are the sun, the moon, old and new trees, daffodils, clear rills, musk roses that bloom among the thick forest ferns.

(Q.) List the things that cause suffering and pain.

(Ans) The things that cause suffering are dark phases of our life, adverse circumstances, gloomy days, death of noble people and bad health.

(Q.) What does the line 'Therefore are we wreathing a flowery band to bind us to earth' suggest?

(Ans) As a result of all the beautiful things around us, every morning we are weaving a flowery wreath to bind us to the beauties of the earth despite all the sadness.

(Q.) What makes human beings love life in spite of all troubles?

(Ans) In spite of all the sufferings, a beautiful thing helps us to remove the cover of gloom or darkness from our lives.

(Q.) Why is grandeur associated with the 'mighty dead'?

(Ans) Grandeur is associated with the 'mighty dead' because they will always be remembered for their noble and splendid deeds and creations. They have left behind a legacy for us to enjoy.

(Q.) Do we experience things of beauty only for a short time?

(Ans) No, these things of beauty have lasting impression on us. It never passes into nothingness.

(Q.) What image does the poet use to describe the beautiful bounty of the earth?

(Ans) The poet draws out the image of 'an endless fountain of immortal drink' that pours joy on us from the brink of heaven. These are the beautiful things in nature or man-made objects that he calls 'immortal drink'.

(Q.) How does a thing of beauty provide us shelter and comfort?

(Ans) John Keats is a great Romantic poet. He creates images that soothe our senses. Nature bestows us with things of rare beauty. It keeps the shade of trees ready for us to be comfortable and peaceful in it. Beautiful things also provide peace and security so that we can enjoy sound sleep. We are able to enjoy sweet dreams, good health because of them.

(Q.) What spreads the pall of despondence over our dark spirits? How is it removed?

(Ans) Man makes his life miserable and full of suffering because of his own actions. The pall of despondence is the sadness that is a result of one's own actions. A thing of beauty works wonders for man and removes the cover of gloom from his dampened spirits.

(Q.) What is the message of the poem 'A Thing of Beauty'?

(Ans) Keats, an ardent lover of nature, in his poem refers to the powers of nature. He urges mankind to realise these powers and make his life enjoyable and worth living. He tells us how a thing of beauty provides perennial joy to us.

(Q.) How do the 'daffodils' and 'clear rills' enrich our environment?

(Ans) Daffodils are lovely white flowers that bloom in green surroundings. The 'clear rills' or clear streams of water create cooling comfort or passage for themselves as they pass through the thick bushes and ward away the heat of the sun.

(Q.) What is the 'grandeur of the dooms' and 'endless fountain of immortal drink'?

(Ans) The 'grandeur of the dooms' is a reference to our mighty and dead ancestors who have created beautiful objects for us. On the other hand, the 'endless fountain' is the everlasting joy provided to us by the bounties of nature in the form of nectar pouring on us from heaven.

(Q.) What makes human beings love life in spite of all troubles and sufferings?

(Ans) Human beings love life because nature is the best healer and brings beauty and joy to our life. The memory of beautiful experiences helps us to bear our sorrows.

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow:

1) Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing

A flowery band to bind us to the earth,

Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth

Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,

Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways

Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,

- a) What are we doing every day?
- b) Which evil things do we possess and suffer from?
- c) What does the expression 'spite of despondence' imply?
- d) What does 'unhealthy and o'er darkened ways' refer to?

2) A thing of beauty is a joy forever

Its loveliness increases, it will never

Pass into nothingness; but will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

- a) How is a thing of beauty a joy forever?
- b) What do you understand by a 'bower'?
- c) According to Keats, what treasure does a beautiful thing store for us?
- d) What does 'quiet breathing' imply?

3) ...and such are daffodils

With the green world they live in; and clear rills

That for themselves a cooling covert make

'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,

Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms;

- a) How do 'daffodils' and 'rills' enrich the environment?
- b) What makes the mid forest brake rich?
- c) What is the poetic device used in the third line.
- d) Name the poem and the poet.

Answer the following in about 30-40 words.

- 1. What is the cause of our 'gloomy days' and 'dark spirits'?
- 2. What spreads the pall of despondence over our dark spirits? How is it removed?
- 3. What is the message of the poem 'A Thing of Beauty'?
- 4. How do beautiful things help us to live a happy life?
- 5. Keats feels that Nature binds us to the Earth. How does he justify this?
