

Escaping the Inescapable Mind in John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale"

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A swig of whiskey dulls the mind, but the stupor only lasts so long. Consciousness returns, quietly but inevitably. To dull the mind again there must be another swig, and another, and another. In "Ode to a Nightingale," John Keats depicts a man's repeated attempts to forget his existence by focusing on another being: a nightingale. Like alcohol, the bird only offers a temporary distraction before the speaker's thoughts return to himself—but that moment of distraction is something he desperately craves. Throughout the poem, Keats explores how the speaker's fear of his own existence drives him to seek the nightingale again and again as an object to enact escapism.

The ode opens to the speaker in a state of disassociation. Keats begins the poem in *media res*: "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk" (1-2). By not providing context as to why the speaker's "heart aches" or why his senses are dulled, Keats evokes in the reader an experience of disorientation similar to that which the speaker undergoes. The immediate paradox adds to the confusion. The speaker's heart "aches" despite his numbness, and the hard "k" sound punctuates the soft sibilance. This obtrusion highlights the severity of the speaker's internal agony. Still, Keats draws a connection between the ache and the numbness through the conjunction "and." The two are not mutually exclusive; the sequence of words suggests that the aching heart compels the speaker into a state of analgesia as a way to escape his pain. The fact that numbness dominates the rest of the stanza affirms this; Keats forgoes the focus on the heart and develops the speaker's detachment: "One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk" (4). The sibilance of "drowsy," "pains," "numbness," "past," and "sunk," compound the drunken atmosphere, and the ambiguity of the word "sense" extends the speaker's numbness beyond physical sensation to encompass a loss of temporal and spatial

awareness. Keats further alludes to the river of Lethe to incorporate a mental aspect of numbness—forgetfulness—to stress the speaker’s inability to grasp his thoughts.

Even in this intoxicated condition, the speaker remains aware of how others perceive him and thus clarifies that his anguish stems not from his addressee—the nightingale—but from himself. Keats writes that the speaker’s condition “Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness,” (5-6). Interestingly, Keats never denies that the speaker may be envious of the bird’s happiness. He does, however, shift the focus of the poem through the word “but” to specify what causes the speaker’s drunken stupor: Keats stresses a distinction between “envy of” happiness and “being too happy in thine happiness.” The word “too” illustrates a significant difference. It denotes a negative, unwanted surplus and reveals that the speaker is not upset over his emotion but rather the extent to which he feels it. However, since it is difficult—if not impossible—to pinpoint what a surplus of happiness is, the object of excess likely lies in another dimension, such as time or focus. He may spend “too” much energy in the nightingale’s affairs. The fact that he is too happy “in” the nightingale’s happiness builds on this notion. Jealousy “of” another person indicates some distance between oneself and the other, but being happy “in” another’s emotions ties the two identities together. He harbors a tone of resentment toward *himself* for his act of “being” too involved in the nightingale rather than toward the bird for what it has. This ability to observe and even criticize himself reveals a high level of self-awareness, which plays into the sense of detachment; self-awareness relies on the ability to perceive oneself from another’s perspective. Indeed, in these lines the speaker is only able to describe his suffering in relation to the bird—to *its* “happy lot” and *its* “happiness.” Keats therefore establishes the speaker’s aches and numbness “‘Tis” due to his excessive focus on the bird.

However, the speaker's negative feelings toward himself for "being too happy" only advance his need to depersonalize through the bird. After he thinks of "thine happiness," his thoughts linger with the nightingale: "That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless," (7-9). Even though the speaker does not exhibit jealousy, his mind dwells on minute details of the nightingale: its light wings, the "plot" it flies over, and the "green" that it sees. The imagery depicts an ascension where the speaker's mind soars into the sky, taking on the identity of the bird to see what it sees; after all, only from a high vantage point does one observe "shadows numberless."

A break in the stanzas then forces a literal drop in the lines as well as in the setting, depicting a pattern where the speaker's thoughts inevitably return to himself. The speaker's desire for alcohol causes him to think of the "deep-delved earth" (12) that stores wine. His own appetite pulls the landscape down from the sky to the ground where he resides. Keats then describes the alcohol until it leads to the speaker's awareness of his own body:

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 (17-22)

The sustained rhyme scheme and structure in each stanza create a smooth pace that mirrors a fluid train of thought. The speaker's mind naturally moves from the "trees" (7) to the "earth" (12) to his own "purple-stained mouth." This slow, logical descent throughout several lines consequently emphasizes the abrupt movement described in line 19.

Immediately after the speaker recognizes his own body, Keats introduces a second-person pronoun, conveying how the speaker focuses on the nightingale to escape his thoughts. Keats ends line 18 with a semicolon to indicate a shift; just as the speaker remembers his “purple-stained mouth,” he wishes to “drink.” Anything that reminds him of his existence causes a need to escape—a need to be with the nightingale. The assonance of “thee,” (20) “green,” (13) “Hippocrene,” (16) and “unseen” (19) associates the nightingale with objects that are far away from the speaker. As in line 9, “green” describes an expansive view of the landscape that one witnesses with height. “Hippocrene” further brings in a mental aspect of detachment: imagination. The nightingale inspires the speaker’s mind to wander toward areas where he will be “unseen.” The rhyme of “brim” and “dim” emphasizes the speaker’s desire to head toward darkness, where he and others cannot observe himself.

Still, the paradoxical pattern continues where the speaker’s attempt to escape his mind only draws awareness toward himself: “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known, / The weariness, the fever, and the fret” (21-23). Again, the second-person pronouns highlight the speaker’s immense fear of self-awareness. He only describes mortality through the lens of the bird. He wants to forget what “thou has never known,” not what *he* has always known because the latter would admit an acknowledgment of his existence. Despite this, the very attempt to forget something forces one to remember that object. Since the speaker wants to forget about human frailty, he continually thinks of his own body. Keats employs alliteration to draw an audial connection between “fade,” “forget,” “fever,” and “fret,” underlining the interconnectedness of these thoughts and how one cannot think their way out of thinking.

This cyclical pattern where the speaker loses and regains self-awareness causes him to look to the bird with increasing desperation. His thoughts on fatality give way to a sudden exclamation: “Away! away! for I will fly to thee” (31). The exclamation points and repetition of “away” express panic and exasperation. He declares the statement to himself in simple future tense to comfort himself by saying he “will” do this with certainty. The speaker is desperate to get “away” from his current location. Since physical flight is impossible, it is evident that the speaker wants to get “away” from his present thoughts on human illness and death. The monosyllabic words quicken the pace as if the speaker is unwilling to stop and dwell on any single thought. This fear of remaining with his thoughts thus transforms the nightingale from an object of relief to refuge. He is consumed by his desire to “fly to” the nightingale.

Keats then epitomizes the paradoxical nature of avoiding one’s thoughts by removing the nightingale from the speaker’s awareness. The speaker finally “cannot see” (41) the real world around him, but that causes the thoughts in his mind to take on solidity: “in embalmed darkness ... / Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves” (43, 47). He projects his desire to “fade away” (21) from his mortality onto the “fading violets.” The landscape around him shrivels because it is the landscape of his mind; his preoccupation with death seeps into every thought. The absence of auditory imagery intensify the isolating effect of darkness. The nightingale is fully absent in stanza 5, so the speaker must find another way to escape his thoughts: “Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain” (65-66). He attempts to “listen” (62) but there is no sound but his “quiet breath” (64). Utterly alone with the consciousness he so fears, death appears a fine way to “cease.” The verb cease fits the speaker’s idea of death because it halts movement. He wishes to “cease” his moving mind which continually draws awareness to himself. Here Keats’ familiarity with bodily frailty seems to bleed into the speaker’s

hyperbolically pleasant description of death. As a poet, Keats' struggle with illness was likely more mental than physical—he thought extensively about mortality, so while death by tuberculosis was painful, the death of his thoughts was not: and this is the death that the speaker desires.

Ironically, it is the speaker's ceaselessly wandering mind that forces him to move past the idea of his own death. He recognizes that "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!" (69-71). Just as the speaker's thoughts had shifted from the nightingale to his body before, they now shift from his body back to the bird. He recognizes that if he dies, there will be no one to listen to the bird's calls. In this sense he finds something good in his body: the ability to listen. With this recognition comes a shift in tone. He suddenly praises the bird, calling its requiems "high." The perfect iambic pentameter of line 71 makes the speaker's declaration loud and clear. He is so passionate about the bird's immortality that he addresses it twice in one line; the speaker's aforementioned dependency on the nightingale as a means to forget his own worries thereby culminates in this strong praise for the nightingale's song.

This tone of reverence ultimately gives way to anger because the nightingale is in fact not immortal. When the speaker recognizes this, he disparages the bird: "Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf" (93-94). Keats places "Adieu!" in a location similar to "Away!" in stanza 4. Furthermore, both words begin with the "uh" sound and have two syllables. However, "Away!" referred to the speaker's movement of fleeing from himself whereas "Adieu!" highlights the speaker's immobility as the nightingale flies away. The bird's anthem even "fades" in a way that the speaker had tried to, and the words "cheat" and "deceive"

indicate that the speaker feels betrayed by this. The gendering of the nightingale also conveys a masculine undertone in which it is easier for the speaker to reproach a woman than a man.

Regardless, the speaker is left alone with nothing external to focus on, so his intoxicated consciousness reabsorbs the poem. He struggles to process his own state of mind: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” (79-80). Without the nightingale, the speaker lacks not only a figure to distract his thoughts but also a reference point to perceive himself. He must claim his emotions for himself and face his fears as his own, not what others “hast never known.” However, the speaker’s practice of directing his attention toward the bird each time he observed himself leaves him unable to process his consciousness: he is unsure of whether he has been awake or asleep. The ambiguity of the final question ties together the speaker’s mental detachment with his reliance on the nightingale. With the music gone and nothing left to distract his fear of mortality, the question becomes metonymic. The speaker does not know whether he should stay alive or die. The uncertain conclusion tainted with suicidal ideation ultimately reflects how the fear of mortality consumes the speaker’s mind when there is not another being to focus on.