

## **Critical Appreciation of Ode to Nightingale : John Keats**

(English-subsiary, Degree-Part-1, Paper-1)

Keats's Ode to a Nightingale is considered one of the finest odes in English Literature. It reveals the highest imaginative powers of the poet. The poem was inspired by the song of a nightingale, which the poet heard in the gardens of his friend Charles Brown. The sweet music of the nightingale sent the poet in rapture and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table, put it on the grass-plot under the plum tree and composed the poem.

After he had finished the poem he came back with scraps of paper in his hand. Brown rescued the papers and found them to be the poem on the nightingale.

Thus the poem is an expression of Keats's feelings rising in his heart at the hearing of the melodious song of the bird. The song of the nightingale moves from the poet to the depth of his heart and creates in him a heartache and numbness as is created by the drinking of hemlock. He thinks that the bird lives in a place of beauty. When he hears the nightingale's song, he is entrenched by its sweetness and his joy becomes so excessive that it changes into a kind of pleasant pain. He is filled with a desire to escape from the world of caring to the world of beautiful place of the bird.

The poem presents the picture of the tragedy of human life. It brings out an expression of Keats's pessimism and dejection. He composed this poem at the time when his heart was full of sorrow. His youngest brother Tom had died, the second one had gone abroad and the poet himself was under the suspense and agony by the passionate love for Fanny Browne. All these happenings had induced in the poet a mood of sorrow. He could not suppress it. Thus the poet enjoys the pleasure in sadness/ pain and feasts upon the very sadness/ pain into joy. This complex emotion gives the poem a unique charm.

In the beginning, Keats seems to be an immature youth with a melancholic heart urging to find a means of oblivion and escape. On catching the sight of a nightingale and hearing its music, which he assumes to be an immortal voice of happiness, Keats feels that his body is getting benumbed. But, he also feels an acute pain because he is conscious of his mortality and suffering. He fantasizes of having drunk hemlock or 'some dull opiate': "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains, / my sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk." The initial situation of awareness and conflict is slowly to change and develop throughout the ode with a corresponding shift in tone. The tragic awareness of suffering inflicts on him a peculiar kind of ache because the opposing effect of dullness, which is the effect of desire, is increasing. The awareness is a burden that makes him 'sunk' gradually towards the world of oblivion.

After describing his plight, Keats acknowledges, rather than envy the bird's 'happy lot' and participates in its permanent happiness. He identifies the bird with dryad, the Greek Goddess of the tree. He contrasts the mortality and suffering of human being with the immortality and perfect happiness of the nightingale. Of course, Keats immortalizes the bird by thinking of the race of it as the symbol of universal and undying musical voice, which is the voice of nature, and also of ideal romantic poetry, of the world of art and spirit. This universal and eternal voice has comforted human beings embittered by life and tragedies by opening the casement of the remote, magical, spiritual, eternal, and the ideal. The poet is longing for the imaginative experience of an imaginatively perfect world. At this stage in the poem, the poet is trying to escape from the reality, and experience the ideal rather than complement one with the other. This dualism is to resolve later. Keats begins by urging for poison and wine, and then desires for poetic and imaginative experience.

Keats develops a dialectic by partaking both the states-the fretful here of man and the happy there of the Nightingale-and serves as the mediator between the two. After activating the world of insight and inner experience by obliterating that of the sense, Keats is revived into a special awareness of the conflict. With this awareness, he moves into a higher thematic ground moving from the ache of the beginning through yearning for permanence and eventually exploring the tension so as to balance the transient with the permanent.

In fact, no one can escape into the ideal world forever. Imaginative minds can have a momentary flight into the fanciful world. But, ultimately one has to return to the real world and must accept the reality. John Keats is no exception to this. He makes imaginative flights into the ideal world, but accepts the realities of life despite its 'fever, fret and fury'.

The process of experience, he has undergone has undoubtedly left him with a heightened awareness of both the modes of experience. When the imaginative life wakes, the pressures of ordinary experience is benumbed: and when ordinary experience becomes acute, the intensity of imaginative reality is reduced. And this makes life and experience more complete.

The song of the bird symbolizes the song of the poet. Keats is contrasting the immortality of poetry with the immortality of the poet. This is the climax of the poem and the point where the different themes harmonized—the beauty of the nightingale's song, the loveliness of the Spring night, the miseries of the world, the desire to escape from those miseries by death, by wine, or by poetry.

The Ode is not the expression of a single mood, but of a succession of moods. From being too happy in the happiness of the bird's song, Keats becomes aware of the contrast between the bird's apparent joy and the misery of the human condition, from the thought of which he can only momentarily escape by wine, by poetry, by the beauty of nature, or by the thought of death. In the seventh stanza the contrast is sharpened: the immortal bird, representing natural beauty as well as poetry, is set against the 'hungry generations' of mankind. Keats expresses with a maximum of intensity the desire to escape from reality, and yet he recognizes that no escape is possible.

One kind of mastery displayed by Keats in this ode is worth noting—the continuous shifting of view-point. We are transported from the poet in the garden to the bird in the trees; in the second stanza we have glimpses of Flora and Provence, followed by one of the poets drinking the wine; in the fourth stanza we are taken up into the starlit skies, and in the next we are back again in the flower-scented darkness. In the seventh stanza we rang furthest in time and place. The nightingale's song is unrestricted by either time or space. The voice of the nightingale is made immune first to history, and then to geography. It can establish a rapport with dead

generations or with faery lands. In the last stanza we start again from the Hampstead garden, and then follow the nightingale as it disappears in the distance.

The poem expresses the poet's love of romance, deep delight in nature and his interest in the Greek mythology. In the poem the reference to Flora, Dryad, and Bacchus is made which are all related to Greek mythology. It shows that Greek mythology had a deep hold on the mind of the poet. The poem contains concrete imagery, richness of colouring and the elements of charm and deep human interest. The mastery of poetic language is perfectly seen in the poem. The style of the poem is Shakespearean. The expressions are unsurpassed.

To sum up, Keats soars high with his 'wings of poesy' into the world of ideas and perfect happiness. But the next moment, consciousness makes him land on the grounds of reality and he bids farewell to the ideal bird. At this moment, Keats must also have been conscious that the very bird, which he had idealized and immortalized, existed in the real world, mortal and vulnerable to change and suffering like himself.

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After Shakespeare, Milton is the greatest English poet, which means he is the greatest English poet outside the drama. Moreover, in the almost unanimous judgement of the critic, he is to be regarded as one of the three or four supreme poets of the world. In him we have a wonderful ~~power~~ union of intellectual power and creative power both at their highest. He is also a consummate literary artist. Who touch as sure in delicate detail as in vast general effects. We have come to denote by the epithet 'Miltonic' is his sublimity.

Milton's Age:- Puritanism as a moral and social force, its establishment as the controlling power in the state and the religious and political struggles by which these were accompanied, are for the students of the literature of Milton's age. Puritanism also advocated very strict views concerning life and conduct and thus came to be called Puritans. Within its range, the influence of Puritanism upon the tone and temper of English life and thought was profound. The spirit it introduced

was fine and noble, but it was hard and stern. we admire the Puritans integrity and uprightness but deplore his his fanaticism, his moroseness and the narrowness of his outlook and sympathies

Milton's Life:- John Milton was born in Bread Street, Cheapside, London on 9th Dec 1608 or some four years before Shakespeare's retirement to Stratford. His father though strongly Puritan in his sympathies was none the less a lover of literature and art and the child enjoyed all the advantages of a cultivated home. After school education he entered Christ College, Cambridge and took his B.A. in 1629 M.A. in 1632. His systematic studies did not, however close with the close of his ~~studies~~ college course. He decided to give himself up entirely to self-cultured ~~society~~ poetry. After thirtieth year, he ~~set~~ resolved to complete his studies by travel so he ~~to~~ left London and went to Paris and Italy and after fifteenth months returned to homeland and became an active supporter of Puritan cause against the Royalists. As a pamphleteer he became indeed one of the great pillars of that cause. In 1653 a terrible calamity overtook him, his sight which had long been failing was now ruined entirely by over stress of work

over stressed of work and became totally blind.

Milton's work:- Milton's work falls naturally into four periods

(3) The college period:- His college poems, Latin and English, are for the most part simply a young man's experimental work and while interesting to special student as the expression of his genius during its immaturity they have little other importance.

(5) So the Boston period, on the other hand, belong four minor poems of such beauty and power that even if Paradise Lost had never been written. They would have sufficient to put their author high among the greater poets of English song (Allegro and Il Penseroso, Comus and Lycidas. They show that during these of thoughtful leisure a profound change was taking place in the poet's mind. In Milton's work the moral and religious influence of Puritanism were blended with the generous culture of the Renaissance. It was this combination of elements

which gave its distinctive quality to his greatest poetry. From his early poetry we now learn that he began to write chiefly under the inspiration of the learning and art of the Renaissance

Milton's Lycidas:- In Lycidas we have a Puritanism - which is political and ecclesiastical as well as spiritual and ethical. A monody on the death of Milton's college friend

Thus through these earlier poems we can trace the steady growth of the religious element in Milton's mind. The learning and the art of ~~learning~~ Renaissance were not abandoned by him; but they were more and more used for the service of a Puritan ~~society~~ philosophy of life.