

John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale"

Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" is a famous Romantic poem that explores themes of nature, mortality, and the power of art. The poem is written in eight stanzas of ten lines each, in iambic pentameter with a rhyme scheme of ABABCDECDE

The speaker, lost in deep thought, listens to the nightingale's song and experiences an intense emotional response. The bird's music makes him long for escape from the hardships of human life. He wishes for wine to help him forget his pain but then realizes poetry is a better way to transcend reality. The bird, symbolizing immortality, sings eternally, unaffected by time or death. The speaker, however, is mortal and must return to his world of suffering. The poem ends with uncertainty as he questions whether his experience was real or a dream.

Stanza 1 (Lines 1–10): The Poet's Initial State

1. My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

The speaker feels a deep sadness and a numb, dreamy sensation, as if he has taken a drug.

2. My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

He compares his state to drinking hemlock (a poison) that dulls the senses.

3. Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

Like taking an opiate (a drug) that makes one sleepy and forgetful.

4. One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

He feels as if he is sinking into Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology.

5. 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,

The speaker clarifies that he is not jealous of the nightingale's happiness.

6. But being too happy in thine happiness,—

Instead, he is overwhelmed by the bird's joy.

7. That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,

He calls the nightingale a "light-winged Dryad" (a forest spirit).

8. In some melodious plot

The bird is singing in a beautiful, hidden place.

9. Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,

Surrounded by beech trees and deep shade.

10. Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

The nightingale's song is rich, effortless, and joyful.

Stanza 2 (Lines 11–20): The Desire for Escape

11. O, for a draught of vintage! That hath been

The speaker wishes for a drink of old, strong wine.

12. Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,

A wine that has been chilled underground.

13. Tasting of Flora and the country green,

A wine that tastes of flowers and nature.

14. Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!

A drink that reminds him of Provence (France), known for joy and festivity.

15. O for a beaker full of the warm South,

He longs for a drink filled with the warmth of southern lands.

16. Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,

Hippocrene is the fountain of the Muses in Greek mythology, associated with poetic inspiration.

17. With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,

The wine has bubbles sparkling at the top.

18. And purple-stained mouth;

Drinking the wine would leave his lips stained.

19. That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,

He wants to drink and escape the painful world.

20. And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

He wishes to disappear into the dark forest with the
nightingale.