Ode to a Nightingale

POEM TEXT

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
    My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
    One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
    But being too happy in thine happiness,—
        That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
            In some melodious plot
    Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
        Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
    Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
    Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
    Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
        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,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
    Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
    Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
        Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
            And leaden-eyed despairs,
    Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
        Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
    Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
    Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
    And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
        Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
            But here there is no light,
    Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
        Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
    Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
    Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
    White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
        Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
            And mid-May's eldest child,
    The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
        The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
    I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
    To take into the air my quiet breath;
        Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
    To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
        While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
            In such an ecstasy!
    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!
    No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
    In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
    Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
        She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
            The same that oft-times hath
    Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
        Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
    To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
    As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

SUMMARY

My heart is in pain and my body feels numb and tired. I feel like I've drunk from the poisonous hemlock plant, or like I've just taken some kind of opiate drug and fallen into the waters of Lethe (the river in the ancient Greek mythological underworld that makes you forget everything). Nightingale, I'm not jealous of how happy you sound—I feel like this because I am *too* happy to hear you sing so freely and beautifully. You are like a Dryad—a mythical tree spirit—in your patch of overgrown greenery and shadows, singing summer's song with all your might.

I wish I had some vintage wine that has been stored for years deep in the belly of the earth, wine that tastes of flowers and the countryside, of dancing, folk singing, and happy sunshine! If I could drink a bottle of wine that would transport me to warmer southern lands, one full of water from the mythical Hippocrene spring that grants poetic inspiration. The bubbles would play on the surface of the glass and in my wine-stained mouth. I could get drunk, forget the world, and escape with you, Nightingale, away into the dark forest.

I long to disappear, to forget what you, Nightingale, have never had to know. You live untouched by all the exhaustion, sickness, and worry that come with being part of the human world, where people sit and listen to each other groan in pain, where disease and old age are inevitable, and where youth fades and dies. For human beings, even just to think is to feel suffering, heavy sadness, and pain. In the human world beauty never lasts, and neither does love.

I will fly far away from the human world and to you! I don't need to get a ride from Bacchus (the god of wine). No, I can fly on the wings of poetry instead—even if human consciousness might confuse me and slow me down. Nightingale, I'm already with you in my imagination! The night is gentle, and the moon, the queen of the sky, is sitting on her throne surrounded by her stars. But it's dark where I'm standing, with only a small amount of light making its way through the lush but gloomy trees and winding, moss-covered paths.

I can't see the flowers in the forest around me, nor tell what fragrant plants hang from the trees. The darkness surrounds me, and I try to imagine what is growing in the surrounding space. It's spring time, and the forest is full of grass, shrubbery, and fruit-trees. There are hawthorns and sweet briars, and purple violets hiding under the mulch of leaves on the forest floor. And the musk-rose, with its luxurious scent, will be here soon, crowded by the humming mass of flies in the summer evening.

My mood darkens as I listen to your song, Nightingale. I've often romanticized death, written about and personified it in poetry, half-longing to die myself. Right now seems like a good time to die, to end the pain of human suffering while listening to you, Nightingale, let your ecstatic song pour out from your soul. If I died, you'd go on singing, but your song would be wasted on my ears.

You weren't born to die like me, immortal Nightingale! You don't have new generations of people breathing down your neck. The song I hear is the same one heard many, many years ago in the time of emperors and court jesters. Perhaps it's even unchanged since Biblical times, when Ruth (who stuck by her mother-in-law after she herself was widowed) stood in fields of corn. It's the same song that would charm open the windows of ships on dangerous seas, the same song that could be heard in the forlorn lands where fairies dwell.

Thinking about the word "forlorn" makes me feel like I'm alone again! Goodbye, Nightingale. My imagination can't trick me into thinking I can really fly away with you. Goodbye, Goodbye! Your song grows quiet as you fly past the meadows, over the nearby stream, and up the hill-side. Now you're in the next valley. Was this whole experience real or an illusion? The nightingale's song has gone. Am I awake or asleep?

THEMES

DEATH, TIME, AND IMPERMANENCE

"Ode to a Nightingale" dwells on the idea that nothing can last. The speaker sits in a forest, listening to the beautiful song of the nightingale. The speaker perceives "immortality" in the figure of the bird—a creature that, the speaker believes, is unplagued by human anxiety about the inevitable march of time towards death, and whose song has echoed across the centuries. Eventually, though, even the nightingale flies away—leaving the speaker with a deep sense of loss and a seeming reassurance that *everything* inevitably fades.

A good way to think of the poem, then, is as an elegy for things that haven't yet died. The speaker's ability to enjoy the world is dampened by the awareness that nothing will be around forever. Perhaps that's why the speaker is paradoxically "too happy" to hear the nightingale's song in the first stanza. This happiness is, in a sense, already over—and thereby also feels excessive to the speaker.

Later the speaker focuses on how time relentlessly presses down on people, producing "weariness" and sickness and making people age. Youthful vigor and beauty "fade" as a slow

march towards death takes over. Even "Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow." In other words, beauty cannot stay beautiful, and "new Love" will also soon be gone. Even the natural world comes to represent the crushing progress of time to the speaker, as flowers fade "fast" and become covered by a mush of autumn leaves surrounded by buzzing flies (insects that are often representative of death in literature). Considering all this, the speaker states that it "Now more than ever seems it rich to die" and no longer live with "pain." The speaker thinks it might be easier (or "easeful") to just do away with time and impermanence at the earliest opportunity—via death.

The speaker also weighs up the human situation against that of the nightingale, calling the latter "immortal" and imagining its song as being the same as the song heard in "ancient" and even biblical times. But this, of course, is an exaggeration. The bird is not *really* immortal, but just *appears* so because its song is so beautiful that it seems like a small victory over time and death, briefly—and only temporarily—distracting the speaker from all this anxiety and grief about the fleeting nature of all things.

Ultimately, though, even the nightingale offers no lasting comfort. The speaker repeatedly bids it "adieu" (goodbye) as it flies away, starkly confirming the speaker's anxiety that nothing good or beautiful can last forever. This disorientates the speaker, who wonders if this whole experience has been part of a "vision" or a "dream." The poem's final question can be interpreted in a number of ways, but perhaps it perfectly embodies the speaker's feelings about death, time, and impermanence: "Do I wake or sleep?" That is, perhaps the speaker even while alive is already asleep—because the inevitability of death makes life itself into nothing more than a kind of waking dream.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-6
- Lines 11-20
- Lines 21-30
- Lines 41-50
- Lines 51-60
- Lines 61-70
- Lines 71-80

INTOXICATION, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND ISOLATION

The speaker wants to escape all the pressures and suffering that come with being human, and at times muses that drink or drugs might offer a release. That's because the speaker feels that consciousness *itself* is a kind of burden—that merely "to think is to be full of sorrow." The speaker thus wonders if intoxication, by dulling the senses, might help ease that sorrow. And though the speaker *claims* not to be envious of the "happy" nightingale—which doesn't seem troubled in the same way—the bird serves as a reminder that the speaker *can't* truly escape human awareness (other than through death). The bird, and the beauty of its song, starts to represent freedom from the limiting, isolating confines of the anxious human mind.

The poem both opens and ends with the speaker's drowsiness, suggesting that the speaker finds consciousness exhausting. In the poem's opening lines, the speaker describes feeling a "drowsy numbness" as if the speaker is drunk or has ingested an "opiate" (opiates are drugs derived from the poppy plant, including heroin, morphine, and, of course, opium). The speaker compares this to sinking in the river Lethe—the river in Greek mythology that causes forgetfulness in those who drink its waters.

In the second stanza, the speaker discusses a specific longing for alcohol. The speaker wants "a draught of vintage" or a "beaker full of the warm South." This draws a link, then, between intoxication and comfort (the temporary relief from suffering). Drinking would dull the speaker's perceptions, "leav[ing] the world unseen." But the speaker doesn't *really* want to get drunk—instead, the speaker is longing for purity and beauty, and it's this longing that underpins the speaker's focus on the nightingale's beautiful song.

It's interesting that the speaker doesn't actually describe the nightingale's song at length. Instead, the poem focuses on the speaker's *personal* awareness and how that is affected by the beauty of the nightingale's singing. Even when trying to focus on something external, then, the speakers' experience is always filtered through the speaker's *own* perception; consciousness surrounds the speaker like the walls of a prison. Consciousness is thus not just exhausting, but also *isolating*.

Ultimately, the speaker casts aside intoxication as a means of escaping the suffering that comes with consciousness. The speaker rejects "Bacchus and his pards"—the Greek God of wine and his beastly followers—for the "viewless wings of Poesy." In other words, the speaker briefly thinks that poetry and the imagination will solve the problem of consciousness, even "though the dull brain perplexes and retards" (that is, conscious thought gets in the way of poetry).

In the sixth stanza, the speaker also considers death as an alternative to intoxication. This *would* end the speaker's suffering, but, as the speaker admits, would make also make the speaker "a sod" (a piece of earth) unable to perceive the beauty of the nightingale's song. Suddenly, then, the poem briefly argues *in favor* of human consciousness because it at least allows for the experience of beauty, whether in the natural world or in art.

The speaker's anxiety about conscious thought doesn't find any comforting resolution. Though the poem considers what it means to have human awareness, the speaker admits that there are no easy answers. The temporary joy of the nightingale's

song, which seemed to distract the speaker from these questions, is over soon enough. This returns the speaker back to the speaker's "sole self," again suggesting that ultimately people are alone, confined within the limits of their own minds. And, as if to underscore this irresolution, the poem ends on a question that strikes at its heart: is the speaker awake or asleep? Dreaming, of course, allows dreamers to escape the limits of their reality—which is why the speaker feels that the brief glimpses of freedom in the poem may have been illusory all along.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 11-20
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 31-34
- Lines 41-50
- Lines 55-58
- Lines 59-60
- Lines 63-70
- Lines 71-80

ART, NATURE, AND BEAUTY

"Ode to a Nightingale" explores the relationship between two different types of beauty: the world of art created by humankind, and the rich variety of life created by nature. The poem questions whether nature—represented by the nightingale and its song—represents a kind of beauty greater than anything that humans can make, a beauty that is somehow purer and more eternal. The speaker considers this question throughout the poem, but ultimately finds no simple answer.

The speaker in "Ode to a Nightingale" is not detached from the poem itself—that is, the reader knows that the speaker is a poet and thereby wrapped up in trying to create beauty and art. The speaker weighs up the possible beauty of poetry (standing in for all art) against the overwhelming natural beauty of the nightingale's song.

This opposition between two different types of beauty is outlined from the very beginning of the poem. In the first stanza, the speaker claims to delight in the nightingale's song. The speaker is literally "too happy" to hear the bird's call, its "full-throated ease." Nature, here, is presented as engaging in a kind of creativity that is effortless and pure. The speaker doesn't "envy" the bird—but even mentioning envy suggests that there might be a reason to harbor some kind of resentment towards what the bird represents. That is, the speaker perceives the bird song as a kind of eternal perfection, a beauty created by nature that humankind, for all its efforts and strife, struggles to match.

In the fourth stanza, however, the speaker momentarily *does* feel that human art is a worthy partner of nature's beauty. The speaker will "fly" to the nightingale on "the viewless wings of Poesy." Perhaps, the speaker wonders, poetry can become the speaker's *own* birdsong (and the sheer beauty of the poem itself might support this view). But the speaker's contemplation of the nightingale deepens and undoes this brief moment of self-confidence. The speaker perceives the nightingale's song as "immortal," imagining the bird's voice to have remained pretty much unchanged for millennia (even back to the biblical times of "Ruth"). Human art, on the other hand, is corrupted by interpersonal rivalry and competition—the "hungry generations" that "tread" people down (and it's worth noting that Keats was no stranger to the scorn and wrath of literary society!).

Soon enough, then, the speaker rejects "fancy" (the creative imagination) as a "cheat[er]." Fancy, personified as a "deceiving elf," can never match the pure and simple beauty of the nightingale. That's why, as the nightingale flies away from the speaker, untroubled by any of the speaker's concerns, its song starts to sound "plaintive." The melody becomes sad and mournful (no longer the happy song of stanza 1) because it reminds the speaker of their own limitations. And though human art can undoubtedly be beautiful, the poem seems to argue that art and nature exist in two distinct categories.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 11-20
- Lines 21-30
- Lines 31-40
- Lines 41-50
- Lines 51-60
- Lines 61-70
- Lines 73-74
- Lines 75-80

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

The poem opens *in media res*—in the middle of the action. The speaker, alone in the forest, listens to the nightingale's beautiful song. Through simile, the speaker's mood is compared to a "drowsy numbness" full of "aches" and "pains," similar to the intoxicated feeling that comes with ingesting hemlock (a toxic plant) or "opiate[s]" (a class of drugs that includes opium and heroin). It's not immediately clear yet to the reader just what is

causing this state of mind (and body), however.

The soft /m/, /n/, /s/, and /l/ consonance and /d/ alliteration in these opening four lines give the opening its "drunk" and "drowsy" atmosphere:

> My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
> My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
> Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
> One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

These sounds are intended to intoxicate the reader, luring them into the poem as though through hypnosis. In other words, the poem wants to put the reader in a similar state of mind that the speaker is in during the poem.

These lines also help set up the poem's main themes (without spelling them out too explicitly). The reader can see/hear that the speaker is in some kind of psychic pain—and it will be up to the rest of the poem to explore the causes of this pain. Intoxication—which numbs the powers of perception—sets out the speaker's anxiety about the limits of consciousness (how it is like a mental trap). And nature is *immediately* an important presence, hinting at the poem's exploration of different types of beauty (specifically those of human-made art and those of the natural world). The allusion to Lethe (pronounced lee-thee) hints at the poem's concerns about death and decay (time and impermanence). Lethe is a river in the ancient Greek mythological underworld—and drinking from its waters is said to annihilate the drinker's memory (the word "Lethe" translates as "oblivion").

LINES 5-10

> *'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,*
> *But being too happy in thine happiness,—*
> *That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees*
> *In some melodious plot*
> *Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,*
> *Singest of summer in full-throated ease.*

Lines 5 to 10 explain the causes of the speaker's aching heart and "drowsy numbness." The speaker addresses the nightingale, which the speaker perceives as "happy." Insisting that the speaker is *not* jealous of the nightingale's apparent happiness, the speaker states that this intoxicated and melancholy state of mind is down to "being too happy in [the nightingale's] happiness." This is a paradox that anticipates the tension elsewhere in the poem. On the one hand, the speaker is delighted and emotionally moved by the nightingale's song; on the other, the speaker is troubled and anxious.

Delicate /th/ alliteration in lines 5-7 emphasize the small and graceful beauty of the bird:

> 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
> But being too happy in thine happiness,—
> That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees

These sounds represent the "light-winged[ness]" of the bird. And here, too, is the poem's second allusion to Classical Greek mythology. Dryads are tree spirits, minor (and mortal) goddesses that are intimately connected to the trees. They are also notoriously elusive, which is also true of the nightingale bird (and its song).

Enjambment between lines 7 to 9 recreates the "full-throated ease" of the nightingale's song, as the poem is allowed to flow lyrically without interruption. The /ee/ assonance in this section—"trees," "beeches green," "ease," etc.—is intentionally tuneful. These, combined with the enjambment, help give the reader a somewhat distant but important feel for the presence of birdsong. Indeed, the bird is distant from the speaker too, hidden somewhere in the dense forest.

It's worth noting here that there is some disagreement among critics about whether the poem is set during the day or night. The bird itself is traditionally depicted at night-time (the clue is in the name!), but the presence of "numberless" shadows suggests that there is a light source falling on the forest. It's also "summer," which is the time of year in England when the days are longest.

LINES 11-14

> *O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been*
> *Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,*
> *Tasting of Flora and the country green,*
> *Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!*

The second stanza begins with a direct expression of the speaker's longing for intoxication. The speaker calls out for a "draught" (a glass) of "vintage" (wine), particularly that which has been kept in a dark, cool place for a long time (and therefore has deepened in quality and flavor). The speaker's longing for wine is not to be taken too literally, but more as a dramatic response to the nightingale's song. Wine from the "deep-delved earth" is a stand-in for the speaker's desire to somehow possess the depth and purity that the nightingale's song conveys. Assonance and generally drawn-out vowels help put across the speaker's intense longing (though the specific terms of this longing are not yet drawn in full detail):

> O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
> Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth

These open sounds suggest a long stretch of time of the kind that the speaker refers to in the "ag[ing]" of the "vintage" wine. Elsewhere in the poem, the speaker expresses deep-rooted anxieties about the passing of time—particularly how it prevents beauty from lasting forever and makes death inevitable—so the discussion here is in part about possessing something that would represent a small victory over time itself

(wine that has survived a "long age").

Lines 13 and 14 expand on this idealized depiction of wine. This dream beverage would "tast[e]" of "Flora" and nature's greenery. The capitalization of "Flora" indicates that it is an allusion to the Roman goddess of flowers, rather than the scientific family name for plants and flowers (Keats's poems often contain many references to Greek and Roman myth). It would also taste, more paradoxically, of:

> Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth

In other words, of happy and joyous experience (dancing, singing, and sunshine). The caesurae here give the line a bounce that evokes dancing. "Provençe" is part of southern France (and a well-renowned region for wine!). The mention of dancing is perhaps an allusion to the mythological figure of Bacchus/Dionysus, who encouraged his followers to liberate themselves through intoxication, dance, and ritual. As mentioned, the speaker isn't *really* longing for wine, but for some ideal state of mind.

LINES 15-20

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
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:

The rest of this stanza continues the poem's focus on the speaker's imagined "vintage" (a fine wine) that would somehow induce a particularly longed-for state of mind. Line 14 used synesthesia—the mixing-up of the senses—to describe this wine, and this is continued in line 15: "O for a beaker full of the warm South." This probably picks up on the earlier mention of Provençe, a temperate region in southern France well-regarded for its wines.

The diacope of "full" in lines 15 to 16 ("full of the warm South, / Full of the true...") emphasizes the fullness of this imagined "beaker" of wine (along with the hidden repeat of the same word in "blushful"). This fullness in turn stands in for the extent to which this is an idealization, a kind of fantasy or perfect scenario.

Indeed, line 16 reveals the speaker's motive for wanting this wine. The allusion to "Hippocrene" is another reference to Classical Greek mythology. Hippocrene was a mountain spring, and drinking its waters would bring forth poetic skill and inspiration. It's worth noting that this allusion is similar to the one to the waters of Lethe in the first stanza—two different intoxications with two very different intentions. Here, then, the reader learns that partly underlying the speaker's discussion—which has so far been quite disorientating—is the urge to capture experience in poetry. In other words, to create beauty in art that is worthy of beauty in nature (provided, in this case, by the nightingale).

And it's here, appropriately enough, that the poem ramps up its poetic sounds. Plentiful /b/ alliteration, along with other consonance and assonance, showcases Keats's poetic skill:

> Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
> With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
> And purple-stained mouth;

It's worth saying these lines out loud and noting how they are so close in sound to the thing that they describe. The "beaded bubbles" phrase seems especially onomatopoeic, and even creates a bubble-like feeling when spoken.

Lines 19 and 20 develop the reasoning behind the speaker's apparent longing for (a highly idealized form of) intoxication. Drinking this "vintage" would numb the limits of consciousness that trap the speaker, and liberate the speaker by dislodging the senses' hold on the speaker's mind. The speaker would "leave the world unseen," and join with the nightingale and its song. The notion of "fad[ing] away"—which tunefully alliterates with "forest"—also pre-empts the speaker's appeal to death in the sixth stanza.

LINES 21-26

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;

The third stanza begins with a clear instance of repetition, as though the poem has changed direction at line 20's "fade away" and is now set on this course. There are other examples in which a particular word or phrase uttered by the speaker seems to take hold of the speaker's thoughts (see "Forlorn" at the end of the penultimate stanza in line 70, and then again the start of the last stanza in line 71).

This speaks volumes about one of the poem's main tensions—beauty in *art* vs. beauty in *nature*. At the root of the speaker's anxiety is the idea that the speaker's art—the poem itself—can never be as glorious as the nightingale's song because it depends on human consciousness and, in particular, human language. The nightingale's beauty *seems* more pure because it exists beyond words and thereby ignores the human world and its many problems (some of which are outlined in this stanza).

Here, then, the speaker continues with the longing to "fade far away" with the nightingale—to "dissolve" and forget the trials and tribulations of being human. The soft alliteration of /f/ sounds in "fade far" and "forget" make the link clear between the perceived freedom of the nightingale and the bird's lack of

human consciousness (which the speaker wants to "forget," as per the mention of Lethe in the first stanza). The nightingale has "never known"—and never will know—the typical suffering in human life: "weariness," sickness (Keats had recently lost his brother to tuberculosis), and aging. The many caesurae in lines 23, 24, 25, and 26 make the lines feel awkward and ponderous, representing the idea of ongoing human struggle.

Lines 25 and 26 particularly focus on the fading of youth, which fits in with the poem's overall concern about the way that beauty cannot last forever. (Indeed, rightly or wrongly, the speaker believes that the nightingale *is* a rare example of beauty defeating the relentless march of time; see the penultimate stanza). Youth is personified here as a sickly figure, already a kind of "spectre" because it is haunted by the inevitability of aging and death—of the irretrievable loss of beauty.

LINES 27-30

Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

The third stanza juxtaposes two different locations—the "over there" occupied by the mysterious and beautiful nightingale, and the "here" of the human world, with all its tiredness, misery, and death. In line 17, the speaker explicitly links "sorrow" with human consciousness—just to "think" is be full of "despairs." "Leaden-eyed," meanwhile, means eyes that are dull and heavy with having to perceive the world, and also relates to the way that the speaker privileges the sense of hearing over seeing (because the nightingale's song is an *auditory* beauty). Even the sound of "And leaden-eyed despairs" feels heavy, with its dull, repetitive, thudding *d*.

In lines 29 and 30, the poem personifies "Beauty" itself as a fading figure. "Her lustrous eyes" cannot keep their shine, and no "new Love" can "pine at them beyond to-morrow." In other words, beauty and love are both cursed by the fact that they cannot last. This is a common concern in Keats's odes—essentially, the speakers of the odes are often weighed down by the way that time constantly exerts its power on human life. The end rhymes in line 27 and 30 link "sorrow" with "to-morrow," indicating that this is an ongoing and perpetual fact of life.

LINES 31-35

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee!

The poem picks up the pace in the fourth stanza. Suddenly, the speaker, addressing the nightingale through apostrophe, feels that there *is* a way to join the bird (in its world of mysterious and lasting beauty). The repetition (specifically through epizeuxis) of "Away" indicates that this is a big leap—that the speaker has momentarily travelled a long intellectual and emotional distance.

The speaker is taken hold of by a flash of inspiration and now rejects intoxication—represented by the allusion to "Bacchus and his pards" (Bacchus/Dionysus is the Greek God of wine and revelry)—and the speaker's turning to poetry ("Poesy") to get the "wing" to "fly to" the nightingale. In other words, the speaker will use poetry to create the kind of lasting beauty represented by the nightingale. These "wings" of poetry are "viewless" because poetry, like the nightingale's music, does not have to be a visual medium. That is, it can be consumed through the auditory sensory realm alone.

On the other hand, though, poetry *is* dependent on language, which the speaker views as heavy and cumbersome, ultimately leading to the rejection of poetry/the human imagination too (in line 73). That's why, even in this momentary hopefulness about poetry, the speaker admits that "the dull brain perplexes and retards" ("retards" is a verb meaning "to slow down" or inhibit progress). Suddenly, the speaker feels that they *have* succeeded in joining the bird (though maybe this is just based on the fact that the bird is within earshot, suggested by the word "already" in line 35).

LINES 35-40

tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

Enshrouded by the darkness of the forest, the speaker imagines the "Queen-Moon" shining down, attended by "her starry Fays" (a fay is a fairy). The night is "tender" is because it is suffused with this fantasy, which seems worlds removed from the human suffering outlined in the previous stanza. This point in the poem, then, is a rare instance of peacefulness and calm. It's possible that "Queen-Moon" is an allusion to the greek myth of Selene, the goddess of the moon (also written about in Keats's *Endymion*).

In line 38, however, the poem once contrasts "here" with another place, a "there." If lines 36 and 37 create an image of majestic light in the night sky, lines 38-40 then emphasize the darkness of the forest in which the speaker stands. The only light that the speaker can see comes from "heaven" when "the breezes" create a brief gap in the forest's canopy. The phrase "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" makes the forest seem labyrinthine, perhaps also suggesting the speaker's complex journey into the world of imagination and contemplation (with the nightingale as mysterious guide).

"Verdurous" means lush and green, but the fact that things are also *gloomy* suggests that the speaker is standing in a very thick forest indeed, one in which the treetops are so dense as to block out most light. There is beautiful alliteration, assonance, and consonance at work here:

> Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
> Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

These lines are thick with sound, emphasizing how far into the forest the speaker has travelled. It makes sense that this stanza rings out so pleasantly and satisfyingly on the ear, because these lines represent a brief argument *in favor* of the power of poetry to capture beauty.

LINES 41-45

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;

In the fifth stanza, the speaker attempts to put into practice the revelation in the previous stanza—that "Poesy" (just a literary way of saying "poetry") can somehow match the beauty of the nightingale's song, and thereby bring the speaker and the nightingale metaphorically closer together. This is one of the most sumptuously beautiful stanzas in all of Keats's poetry, and in part an attempt to demonstrate the poet's skill and worth. Lines 41-45 make particular use of /s/, /m/, /b/, /w/. and /th/ consonance:

> I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
> Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
> But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
> Wherewith the seasonable month endows
> The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;

These alternately soft, resonant, and humming sounds depict the care and intensity of the speaker's imagination.

The speaker describes the "embalmed" darkness of the surrounding forest. In such pitch black, the stanza prioritizes the senses of smell and hearing (so it makes sense that these lines sound particularly beautiful). The speaker guesses at the specific surroundings in this forest, drawing not on visual stimulation but on the speaker's own creativity and command of words. The speaker cannot "see what flowers" are on the ground, nor guess at those flowers and fruit ("each sweet" is being used as a noun in line 43) that hang from the trees—and so must create them in words and sound. The speaker *imagines* the beauty that is all around in this forest, linking it to the "seasonable month." In other words, this stanza is about the cycles of abundant beauty that nature creates through the turning of the season.

LINES 46-50

White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Lines 46 to 50 elaborate on the first five lines of the stanza, listing different proofs—as imagined by the speaker—of nature's beauty (specifically tied to the "seasonable month," probably May). The language here is intentionally sensuous, as much about the power of poetry to create its own type of aesthetic pleasure as it is about nature. A key word here is "pastoral," which in another context can specifically mean a type of poetry that idealizes a natural scene—which is exactly what the speaker is doing, imagining the beauty in the surrounding darkness of the forest. Briefly, then, the beauty of art and the beauty of nature are in a kind of union (which doesn't last long!).

The list of different flowers demonstrates the variety and range of nature's beauty, but even these are tied to the speaker's anxieties about time and impermanence. The exquisite purple violets are "fast fading" (just as human life is shown to be in stanza 3). Indeed, this specific image of fading has already been presented earlier in the poem. The musk-rose, which is a fragrant symbol of spring and renewal, is "haunt[ed]" by "murmurous" flies, which can represent death and decay.

These lines are packed full of consonance, alliteration, and assonance:

> White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
> Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
> And mid-May's eldest child,
> The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
> The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

The intense beauty of these lines is deliberately placed at odds with the subtle suggestion that none of it can last. This section, then, represents the point at which the speaker most strongly believes in the possibility of art to create beauty—and it is in the following stanzas when this temporary faith in the human imagination ("fancy") starts to unravel.

LINES 51-54

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;

The suggestion of death and decay in the fifth stanza (through things like the "Fast fading violets" and the "flies" that already start to swam around the "musk-rose") leads on to a more frank

discussion of death in the sixth. This stanza opens with a rather unusual adjective: "darkling." This means "to grow dark" or something that is characterized by darkness, and its placement in the phrase makes it apply to the speaker themselves. In other words, the speaker is "growing dark." The speaker is signaling a shift into a darker mood, one that is more focused on death than beauty.

To that end, the speaker admits that they have a Romantic tendency to focus on "Death" (here personified), as though "half in love" with it. The half that *isn't* in love is presumably the same part of the speaker that laments the fact that beauty, because of the inevitability of death, can never last.

The use of "easeful" in line 52 is intriguing. As with a number of moments in the poem, this is an echo. In line 10, "ease" was associated with the nightingale's song: "Singest of summer in full-throated ease." Perhaps this reference to "easeful death" is thus a subconscious link, subtly hinting at the way that beauty, death, and nature are all intertwined in the speaker's imagination.

The speaker (generally taken to be Keats himself) even draws the link between their own poetry and an obsession with death. Death has been described elsewhere by the speaker with "soft names" and "mused rhyme" (and the soft consonance here supports this sensation of gentleness). Interestingly, this section in line 53 could also read as amused—"a mused." This perhaps suggests an element of naivety, or, more likely, the speaker's latent suspicion that poetry ultimately fails in capturing or creating beauty, especially when compared to the simplicity and purity of the nightingale's song.

LINES 55-60

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Lines 55-60 are the clearest expression in the poem of the speaker's death-wish (though it's not necessarily to be taken literally). Consciousness—being human—is the root of suffering ("pain"), and dying would surely end that suffering. And, considers the speaker, there seems to be no "rich[er]" moment to die than while listening to the "ecstasy" of the nightingale's song.

One alternative interpretation to be considered here is that "rich" can also be an English slang word for "inappropriate." Unlikely though it seems, it's worth acknowledging that the speaker *could* also be saying—or playing with the ambiguity of saying—that to die while bearing witness to the nightingale's beauty would somehow be unjust and unfitting.

The mention of "midnight" relates to the world of fantasy and folklore brought up in the fourth stanza ("Queen-Moon" etc.). Midnight is often depicted as a time when supernatural transformations are most likely to occur (and arguably this is something which the speaker longs for). That said, this moment in the poem seems distinctly grounded, depressed even. The speaker's faith in their own ability to transcend suffering through art (and thereby join the nightingale) is starting to waver, and was only brief in the first place.

Line 57 is the first time since line 35 that the speaker has specifically mentioned the nightingale. The assonance in the line is important:

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad

These melodious open vowels (the /ow/ in "thou" and "soul," and the similar vowel sounds of "pouring forth" and even "abroad") recall the "full-throated ease" with which the nightingale sings its beautiful song. But there is a contradiction here: part of the speaker's admiration of the bird comes from the way that the nightingale's song is untroubled by human consciousness—but this *also* prevents the nightingale from being truly *relatable* too. The whole structure of the poem, then, is built on inevitable failure, the *impossibility* of communication between the speaker and the bird.

As though realizing the above, the speaker has second thoughts about the death-wish expressed in lines 59 and 60. If the speaker were dead, the nightingale would go on singing—and the former wouldn't be able to appreciate the latter's beauty, even if that beauty does seem to come with a fair helping of psychic pain! The speaker would be nothing more than "a sod"—a part of the damp earth—in contrast to the bird's "high requiem." "Requiem" is an important word choice, denoting a type of song or piece of music written and performed to mark somebody's death.

LINES 61-64

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:

Line 61 is hyperbolic, the speaker addressing the nightingale as "immortal Bird!" (also using apostrophe). The caesura literally and figuratively separates the bird from "death," indicating the privileged place the nightingale occupies in the speaker's view of the world. By implication, humans *are*, by contrast, "born for death"—and this brute fact is at the root of much of the speaker's anxiety throughout the poem.

But, of course, nightingales aren't literally immortal. So, in a sense, the speaker is projecting their own ideals, specifically about beauty, onto the bird. Line 62 ("No hungry generations tread thee down;") seems provide one of the reasons for this thought. Whereas the world of literature is competitive and full

of cynicism (which Keats encountered throughout his short writing career), the bird is untroubled by any of this. Furthermore, continues the speaker, the nightingale's voice is the same as that heard "in ancient days by emperor and clown." In the nightingale's song, then, the speaker hears a small victory of beauty over time and impermanence.

Whether this is true, of course, is another matter. The mention of "emperor and clown" also talks about the way that the kind of beauty that the speaker believes in is untied to power or status, the nightingale's song ringing out pure and clear in the ears of rulers and the lowly. The repetition of hear/heard further suggests continuity through the ages.

LINES 65-70

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Lines 65 to 70 cast the speaker's imagination back even further than the "ancient days of emperor and clown." Now, the speaker imagines the nightingale's song being heard all the way back in biblical times, alluded to in the mention of "Ruth." Ruth is a character in the Bible who demonstrates faith and loyalty by staying by her mother-in-law's side after she (Ruth) is widowed. The speaker imagines the nightingale's song bringing some semblance of happiness to Ruth in her darkest hour, the alliteration of "self-same song" suggesting the way in which the tune has remained the same across the centuries. Like the speaker, Ruth had a "sad heart" (similar to the "aches" mentioned in the first stanza). This is a fairly unusual allusion in Keats's poetry, which tends to lean more on Ancient Greek and Roman mythologies.

Lines 68-70 represent a brief return to the more fanciful world of myth and folklore. The speaker considers the enchantment of the nightingale's song, imagining it "charm[ing]" open the windows of seaborne travelers. In this dreamy image, the beauty of the song brings comfort to sailors on "perilous seas," and wanderers "in faery lands forlorn." The language is once again intoxicating and sensual, which tends to happen when the speaker focuses intently on the beauty of the nightingale's music:

> The same that oft-times hath
> Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

As shown above, there is hardly a syllable in these lines that is untouched by either alliteration, consonance, or assonance. The sheer beauty of these sounds mirrors the purity of the nightingale's song, one last attempt by the speaker to create something of poetic worth equal to the bird. But the characters in this stanza—Ruth, the seafarers, the explorers of faery lands—are also isolated figures. In this sense, referencing them positions the speaker in a similar relationship with the bird, the song bringing both comfort and a heightened sense of loneliness.

LINES 71-74

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

The final stanza opens with a repetition of the last word of the previous stanza: "forlorn!" This form of repetition, in which the same word ends one sentence and begins the next, is technically known as anadiplosis. Just the mention of this word works like "a bell" (a simile) in the speaker's mind, pulling the speaker back from the nightingale to the speaker's "sole self." This "sole self" is a kind of admission, the speaker realizing that, though beautiful, the nightingale's song ultimately *can't* answer the questions and worries that the speaker harbors so deeply (questions about time, suffering, death, and beauty).

The bell simile isn't chosen at random, but relates to the rest of the poem. First of all, it is a sound, fitting into the poem's general focus on the *hearing* sense (as opposed to the visual, as Keats focuses on in, for instance, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). Also importantly, bells are often used to mark solemn occasions—like funerals or anniversaries of significant historical events. This means that the "toll[ing]" of the word "forlorn" signifies an important—and final—shift in speaker's state of mind. Having wrestled with the meaning of the nightingale's song, and how the experience of this music relates to being human, the speaker finally feels their physical and psychological distance from the bird. The nightingale is elsewhere, out of grasp, both in terms of its position in the forest and in terms of its ability to provide the speaker with any comforting answers about life. The enjambment at the end of line 71 means that the word "bell" rings out loud and clear ("... bell / To toll ..."), the /l/ sound also chiming through consonance with "toll" and "sole" (and these last two are assonant long /o/ sounds as well).

Ultimately, then, this is goodbye, with the speaker bidding "adieu" to the nightingale. (It's worth noting that this same word appears in almost all of Keats's odes.) The speaker resigns to the fact that "fancy"—the human imagination—can neither match up to the purity and simplicity of the nightingale's song, nor capture its beauty. The human imagination is personified as a "deceiving elf"—enchanting, but, when all is said and done, based on falsehood and deception. As if on cue, the nightingale then flies away.

LINES 75-80

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

In the poem's closing lines, the nightingale flies away. Its song thus "fades" away—a word used throughout the ode. At the start of line 75, the speaker again bids the bird "Adieu!" and this time repeats the word immediately (an example of epizeuxis). The nightingale's flight away from the speaker represents the speaker's inability to find satisfactory answers to the poem's main problems and anxieties—human suffering, the relentless march of time, death, whether human art can match up to the natural world, and so on. The repeat of "Adieu" is intentionally like the ringing of a bell, ringing out to mark the separation of the speaker and the nightingale and indeed to toll the poem's ending.

The nightingale's song, once so happy that the speaker was practically *too* happy (stanza 1), now sounds "plaintive" (which essentially means sad and mournful) as it fades away. Lines 76 to 77 describe the passage of the bird away from the speaker, the song fading out as it passes "the near meadows," heads "over the still stream," and "up the hill-side." The similar grammatical construction of these three phrases, combined with the caesura that separates the first two and the line break, conveys the way that the bird becomes increasingly distant, as though each phrase is another stage on the flight away from the speaker.

Soon enough, the song becomes "buried deep / In the next valley-glades," returning the speaker to the speaker's "sole self." The nightingale once seemed like it could provide an answer to some of the speaker's most profound questions, but that now feels long ago. Instead, the speaker is left only with *more* rhetorical questions:

> Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
> Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Notice how the two options in the first question are *both* based on falsehood and unreality. The question isn't poised between reality and illusion, but "a vision" and "a waking dream." The mention of "vision" is also unsettling because the poem has relied so heavily on the auditory sense, almost entirely foregoing visual description. These questions, then, have a disorientating effect that matches with the speaker's own confusion. Indeed, it *does* feel like the speaker has just awoken from some kind of stupor. The shift into the past tense with "fled" is important too, signaling that the nightingale—and everything that it represented—now well and truly eludes the speaker. For that reason, then, the speaker's entire consciousness is disrupted, leaving the speaker unable to tell what is real anymore.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a consistent presence in "Ode to a Nightingale" (which is also full of consonance and assonance). This is a very beautiful sounding poem, which is part of the point; the speaker is trying, in part, to use poetry to achieve the same kind of beauty embodied by the nightingale's song.

Alliteration also reflects the lines' content in certain points. In lines 1 to 3, for example, note the many /d/ sounds. This is a heavy, voiced consonant that adds a sense of weight and insisting thudding to these lines—which is appropriate, given that the speaker is talking about being very down:

> My heart aches, and a **d**rowsy numbness pains
> My sense, as though of hemlock I had **d**runk,
> Or emptied some **d**ull opiate to the **d**rains

The /d/ sound returns in line 12: "**d**eep-**d**elved" supports the image of "vintage" wine cooled in the belly of the earth. The two /d/ sounds are again quite strong, as though being dug into the line themselves.

Later in the first stanza, the alliteration of "**s**ingest" and "**s**ummer" suggests the first notes of a tune (as though the poem is going to play the /s/ song!). In doing so, alliteration evokes the sound of the nightingale itself. The /s/ sound is again associated with beauty and comfort via the alliteration (and broader consonance) in stanza 2:

> Dance, and Provençal **s**ong, and **s**unburnt mirth!
> O for a beaker full of the warm **S**outh,

The /s/ sound is connected to the bird throughout the poem, in fact. For instance, in line 59, the two /s/ sounds of "**s**till" and "**s**ing" echo the first mention of the nightingale's song in the first stanza (again, "**s**ingest" and "**s**ummer"). And in line 65, the alliteration suggests the continuity of the nightingale through the ages, from Biblical times all the way to the poem's present. The uniformity of /s/ sounds in "**s**elf-**s**ame **s**ong" suggests a tune that has gone unchanged over centuries, perhaps even millennia.

Line 15 also introduces alliteration start on the bright /b/ sound:

> O for a **b**eaker full of the warm South,
> Full of the true, the **b**lushful Hippocrene,
> With **b**eaded **b**ubbles winking at the **b**rim,

The /b/ sound rings out across these lines, adding a burst of brightness to this description. In line 17 the alliteration (and consonance) is almost onomatopoeic with the phrase "beaded bubbles." Try reading these lines out loud to notice how the /b/ cause the mouth to make a bubble-blowing action!

Another striking example stretches across the end of the second stanza and into the start of the third:

> And with thee fade away into the forest dim:
> Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget

These /f/ sounds link three key components of the poem: the act of forgetting, the forest in which the speaker stands, and literal and metaphorical distance. The speaker can hear the distant sound of the nightingale among the trees, and longs to "fade" away from the human world, to "forget" the suffering and pain of human consciousness. This /f/ is a soft sound too, representing the way that "fad[ing]" is a gradual process.

The final key example is near the end of the poem. In line 70 "Faery" chimes with "forlorn" (and the latter word is then repeated at the start of line 71). This echoes the earlier association of /f/ with "fading," but also links the idea of being "forlorn"—sad and melancholy—with fantasy. If the "faery lands" are tied to the human imagination, which the speaker names with another /f/ word, "fancy," then it is in part this ability to deceive themselves that *makes* people "forlorn."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “d”
- **Line 2:** “d”
- **Line 3:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 5:** “th,” “th,” “h”
- **Line 6:** “B,” “b,” “h,” “th,” “h”
- **Line 7:** “Th,” “th”
- **Line 10:** “S,” “s”
- **Line 12:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 14:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 15:** “b,” “S”
- **Line 16:** “b”
- **Line 17:** “b,” “b,” “b”
- **Line 19:** “d”
- **Line 20:** “f,” “f,” “d”
- **Line 21:** “F,” “f,” “f”
- **Line 22:** “n,” “kn”
- **Line 23:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 24:** “ H,” “h”
- **Line 29:** “c,” “k,” “l”
- **Line 30:** “L”
- **Line 31:** “A,” “a,” “f,” “f”
- **Line 32:** “b,” “B,” “p”
- **Line 33:** “B,” “P”
- **Line 34:** “b,” “p”
- **Line 39:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 40:** “w,” “w”
- **Line 41:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 42:** “b”
- **Line 43:** “B”
- **Line 45:** “Th,” “th,” “th,” “th,” “w”
- **Line 46:** “W,” “th”
- **Line 47:** “F,” “f”
- **Line 48:** “m,” “M”
- **Line 49:** “m”
- **Line 50:** “m”
- **Line 52:** “h,” “h”
- **Line 53:** “h,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 54:** “T,” “t”
- **Line 55:** “s”
- **Line 56:** “c,” “p”
- **Line 57:** “p,” “s”
- **Line 59:** “S,” “s”
- **Line 61:** “b,” “B”
- **Line 65:** “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 66:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 69:** “f”
- **Line 70:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 71:** “F,” “b”
- **Line 72:** “T,” “t,” “b,” “t,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 74:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 75:** “A,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 76:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 79:** “ W,” “w”
- **Line 80:** “w”

ALLUSION

As with many Keats poems, "Ode to a Nightingale" is full of allusions. Most of these are references to Ancient Greek/Roman mythology, which helps give the poem a sense of timelessness and mystery.

The first allusions are in the very first stanza. The speaker imagines "sinking" towards Lethe, a river in the Greek mythological underworld. Drinking from this river would cause forgetfulness or oblivion in the mind of the drinker—which is something the speaker in part desires because the speaker wants to escape the pain and suffering of human consciousness for something more pure (like the nightingale's song). The nightingale is portrayed as a "Dryad," which is *kind of* personification in that dryads are human in appearance. Dryads are tree spirits, the notoriously elusive protectors of the forest.

The second stanza also uses allusion, referencing "Flora," the Roman goddess of plants and flowers. This helps build the comparison in the poem between beauty in *nature* and beauty in *art*. The speaker references drinking (as in the first stanza!) from the "Hippocrene," which is a mythological stream that grants poetic inspiration to those who drink its waters. At this

point in the poem, the speaker still seems to believe that poetic beauty is somehow *worthy* of natural beauty—but this particular allusion creates a scenario in which the former is dependent on the latter (that is, artistic inspiration depends on nature's help).

The allusions in this fourth stanza is also related to Greek myth. The speaker decides that the kind of intoxication achieved through hanging out with the God of wine, Bacchus, is *not* the way to combat the suffering of the human world—and that poetry is the appropriate response.

The other main allusion in the poem is in lines 65 to 67. In the penultimate stanza, the speaker imagines how the nightingale's song has been heard for centuries and stayed pretty much the same. Not content with casting their mind back to the "ancient days" of "emperor and clown," the speaker imagines a Biblical figure, Ruth, hearing the song. In the book of Ruth (Old Testament), Ruth decides not to return to her hometown after she is widowed, instead opting to stay and look after her mother-in-law. Here, then, she is used as an example of a solitary and melancholy figure—who perhaps nonetheless found some small comfort in the beauty of the nightingale's song.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Lethe"
- **Line 7:** "Dryad"
- **Line 13:** "Flora"
- **Line 16:** "Hippocrene"
- **Line 32:** " Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards"
- **Lines 65-67:** "Perhaps the self-same song that found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn;"

APOSTROPHE

Practically speaking, "Ode to a Nightingale" is one long apostrophe to, well, a nightingale. Apostrophe is a term that describes a speaker addressing someone or something that is not actually immediately present, with the "to" of the title offering a clue to the way that this poem is set up.

The most important general effect of the apostrophe is to do with position and distance. In the poem, the speaker occupies one part of the forest, the nightingale another. The speaker is aware of the nightingale's presence by virtue of its beautiful song, but the bird probably doesn't know—nor need to know—about the speaker. This emphasizes that this is a one-way exchange, the speaker reaching for a kind of communication or understanding that will never be achieved (which is partly why the poem ends with a rhetorical question). Whenever the speaker refers to "thou" (or says "thine"/"thy" etc.), it's directed at the nightingale.

That said, it's notable how little the poem actually focuses on the nightingale's song. The song is certainly the motivation behind the speaker's words and thoughts, but the reader is given a much more vivid experience of the speaker's interior state than of the beauty of the song itself. This relates to the way that the speaker has a troubled relationship with consciousness, feeling that the "dull brain perplexes and retards" (preventing anything as pure or beautiful as birdsong). As if to emphasize that the poem's main mode of speech has been apostrophe—rather than *conversation*—the nightingale eventually flies off, leaving the speaker alone with their thoughts.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-10:** "'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness,— / That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless, / Singest of summer in full-throated ease."
- **Line 20:** " And with thee fade away into the forest dim:"
- **Line 31:** "Away! away! for I will fly to thee,"
- **Lines 55-60:** " Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain, / While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy! / Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— / To thy high requiem become a sod."
- **Line 61:** "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!"
- **Line 62:** " No hungry generations tread thee down;"
- **Lines 73-75:** "Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. / Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "Ode to a Nightingale." As noted in our discussion of alliteration, the poem simply *sounds* beautiful, which reflects the speaker's interest in creating beauty that approaches that of the nightingale's song.

As with alliteration and consonance, the poem's assonance also helps draw readers' attention to specific words and phrases. In the poem's opening lines, for example, the long /a/ sound repeats in "aches," "pains," "opiate," and "drains," stretching out these words and drawing readers' attention to the intensity of the speaker's pain.

But perhaps the most assonant stanza of them all is the fifth (starting with line 41). In a display of imagination and poetic skill, the speaker conjures a picture of the surrounding forest even though it's so dark that the speaker can't really see it. In this stanza, the speaker briefly holds the belief that poetry can somehow match the pure beauty of the nightingale's song—and turning up the sound effects is a way of making the poem a more pleasurable and sensuous experience.

Then, at the end of the seventh stanza, the poem uses two slightly different long /o/ sounds in its discussion of the eternal character of the nightingale's song:

> The same that oft-times hath
> Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

This assonance functions like an echo, mimicking the "full-throated" assonance that was used in the first stanza during the discussion of the birdsong.

In the final stanza, assonance through long /ee/ sounds links the speaker to the personified human imagination ("fancy"), who is portrayed as a "deceiving elf" that "cheat[s]." Tying these together conceptually (the speaker's fancy to the cheating, lying elf) shows that the speaker is actually a part of this deception—having early convinced themselves that they could conjure a beauty through words as pure and true as the nightingale's song.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "ai"
- **Line 2:** "e," "e," "u"
- **Line 3:** "e," "o," "u," "a," "ai"
- **Line 4:** "O," "u," "u"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o"
- **Line 7:** "o," "ee"
- **Line 8:** "o," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 9:** " O," "ee," "ee," "o," "u"
- **Line 10:** "u," "ea"
- **Line 11:** "au," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 12:** "a," "a," "e," "ee"
- **Line 14:** "u," "i"
- **Line 16:** "u," "u," "e"
- **Line 17:** "ea," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 19:** "I," "i," "ea," "ee"
- **Line 20:** "ee," "a," "a"
- **Line 21:** "a," "a," "a," "a," "e"
- **Line 22:** "ea," "e," "o"
- **Line 23:** "e," "ea," "i," "e," "e"
- **Line 24:** "e," "e," "ea," "ea," "oa"
- **Line 25:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 26:** "ie"
- **Line 28:** "eye"
- **Line 29:** "eye"
- **Line 30:** "i"
- **Line 31:** "I," "y"
- **Line 35:** "ee"
- **Line 36:** "y," "e," "ee"
- **Line 40:** "ou," "u," "ou," "oo"
- **Line 41:** "ee," "o," "ee"
- **Line 42:** "o," "o," "ou"
- **Line 43:** "a," "a," "e," "e," "e," "a," "ee"
- **Line 44:** "e," "a," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 45:** "e," "e," "i," "e," "e," "ee," "i"
- **Line 46:** "i," "o," "o," "i"
- **Line 47:** "o," "o," "e"
- **Line 48:** "i," "e," "i"
- **Line 49:** "o," "u," "i"
- **Line 50:** "u," "u," "ou," "i," "u," "e"
- **Line 51:** "I," "i"
- **Line 52:** "I," "ee," "ea"
- **Line 53:** "y"
- **Line 54:** "y," "i"
- **Line 55:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 57:** "ou," "ou," "o," "ou"
- **Line 60:** "y," "i"
- **Line 64:** "a," "a"
- **Line 69:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 70:** "O," "o," "o"
- **Line 71:** "e," "e"
- **Line 72:** "o," "e," "ee," "o," "e"
- **Line 73:** "y," "ea," "e"
- **Line 74:** "e," "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 75:** "ai," "a"
- **Line 76:** "ea," "ea"
- **Line 77:** "ee"
- **Line 78:** "a"
- **Line 79:** "a," "ea"
- **Line 80:** "a," "ee"

CAESURA

Caesurae are used throughout "Ode to a Nightingale." Sometimes, they just help the poem vary its sentence length over different lines. At other times, though, they have a more significant effect. The poem actually opens quite awkwardly, with both the opening lines using caesura early in the line:

> My heart aches, ...
> My sense, ...

This has the effect of instantly disorientating the reader, helping to convey the speaker's "drowsy numbness." Later, in line 14, the caesurae make the line feel like it has a bounce to it, supporting the references to dancing and singing. Indeed, they help make the line sound almost waltz-like:

> Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!

in lines 21-26, the poem returns to using caesurae as a way of disrupting—rather than encouraging—the poem's flow. The speaker chronicles a wish to "fade" away and "dissolve," in order to be relieved from the world of human suffering. The numerous caesurae give the lines a tired, almost clunky

resignation, as though it's a great effort to actually get the words out.

Line 51's caesura is also of note, creating a pause after the word "listen." Appropriately enough, this removes the noise of the poem for a short moment, with "listen" creating a small silence in which the reader themselves might pay attention to the sense of hearing.

In line 61, the caesura subtly displays one of the poem's main themes:

> Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

On the one side of this humble comma there is death, and on the other immortality. One of the speaker's main anxieties is the way that time makes death and decay inevitable, and this moment shows that the speaker—rightly or wrongly—sees the nightingale as a figure of immortality.

A final caesura worth noting here is in line 71. This emphasizes the word "forlorn," which is also a repeat of the previous stanza's last word. The caesura, coupled with the repetition, make this word ring out loud and clear—"like a bell." This shows that, ultimately, this is the poem's conclusion. In the end, the speaker *can't* find true solace in poetry, nor answers to the big questions about time, beauty, nature, and death that run throughout the poem.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 2:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “!”
- **Line 14:** “,” “,”
- **Line 16:** “,”
- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 21:** “,” “,”
- **Line 23:** “,” “,”
- **Line 24:** “,”
- **Line 25:** “,” “,”
- **Line 26:** “,” “,”
- **Line 31:** “!,” “!”
- **Line 35:** “!”
- **Line 43:** “,” “,”
- **Line 45:** “,” “,”
- **Line 46:** “,”
- **Line 49:** “,”
- **Line 51:** “;,” “,”
- **Line 59:** “,”
- **Line 61:** “,”
- **Line 69:** “,”
- **Line 70:** “,”
- **Line 71:** “!”
- **Line 73:** “!”
- **Line 74:** “,”
- **Line 75:** “!,” “!”
- **Line 77:** “;”
- **Line 79:** “,”
- **Line 80:** “:—”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a vital part of "Ode to a Nightingale." Indeed, there are hardly any lines *without* some sort of consonance in them. There are also numerous instances of alliteration, which are covered in the specific Alliteration section of this guide.

Some examples, though, matter more than others to what the poem strives to achieve. The first stanza is full of consonance. In lines 1 to 4, /s/ sounds (also known as sibilance) combine with other thick consonance (the buzzing /z/, humming /m/, thudding /d/, and popping /p/ and /k/) to create a heady, almost drunk beginning—as though the poem is under the "drowsy" effects of an intoxicating potion:

> My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
> My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
> Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
> One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

Intoxication is *exactly* what is being described above, so it makes sense that the sound would reflect that. This stanza is typical of Keats's philosophy that poetry should "load every rift with ore"—that is, each line should be packed full of sensuous power.

Though the example in lines 17 and 18 is primarily alliteration, it's worth noting that even individual words contain consonance, making the lines feel like they are overflowing with sensuous sound (mirroring the image of a full cup of wine):

> With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
> And purple-stained mouth;

"Beaded," "bubbles," and "purple" *all* contain internal consonance (e.g., the three /b/s in "bubbles"), creating a sense of abundance and perhaps even luxuriousness. In a way, that's what the speaker wants—to indulge in wine in order to numb the pain of human suffering and the anxieties of consciousness.

The poem relies heavily on consonance again in lines 39 to 40, where the speaker is mentions how little light and wind make it through the thick, lush canopy of the forest. It makes sense that these lines are thick with shared sound, echoing how little space there is between the trees.

And it's probably in the following stanza that consonance is at its most prominent, deliberately coinciding with the speaker's peak moment of faith in human art. Practically every sound in this stanza rings out consonantly with another, form the soft /f/ sounds in "flowers," "feet," and "soft," to the /m/, /r/, and /s/ sounds in the stanzas last three lines ("musk-rose," "murmurous," "summer"). The beauty of the sounds in this stanza work as if to prove that poetry *can* be as majestic and pure as the nightingale's song (a position which the speaker later abandons).

The consonance at the end of the penultimate stanza (lines 65 to 70 in particular) is similarly beautiful, but this time is more about creating a sense of the enchantment of the nightingale's song than proving the poet's worth. As with similar points in the poem, the specific reference to the *sound* of the nightingale increases the extent to which consonants chime together.

Finally, /l/ sounds in the last stanza have a more solemn purpose. They mark—"like a bell" that "toll[s]"—how "forlorn" the speaker has become. The speaker feels isolated now that the bird has flown off, and the speaker goes "back" to their "sole self." With no satisfactory answers to the speaker's inquiring philosophical questions, the speaker ends up pretty much back where the poem started—in a state of "drowsy" melancholy.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “M,” “ch,” “s,” “nd,” “d,” “s,” “n,” “m,” “n,” “ss,” “ns”
- **Line 2:** “M,” “s,” “ns,” “s,” “h,” “m,” “ck,” “h,” “d,” “d,” “k”
- **Line 3:** “mpt,” “s,” “m,” “d,” “p,” “t,” “t,” “d,” “ns”
- **Line 4:** “n,” “m,” “t,” “p,” “s,” “t,” “nd,” “ds,” “d,” “s,” “nk”
- **Line 5:** “pp”
- **Line 6:** “pp,” “th,” “pp”
- **Line 7:** “Th,” “th,” “d,” “D”
- **Line 8:** “l,” “d,” “p,” “l”
- **Line 9:** “n,” “n,” “s,” “m,” “ss”
- **Line 10:** “S,” “s,” “ s,” “mm,” “s”
- **Line 12:** “d,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 14:** “ç,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 15:** “S”
- **Line 17:** “W,” “b,” “d,” “d,” “b,” “bbl,” “w,” “n,” “n,” “b,” “m”
- **Line 18:** “p,” “pl,” “m”
- **Line 20:** “f,” “d,” “f,” “d”
- **Line 21:** “F,” “d,” “f,” “d,” “f”
- **Line 22:** “n,” “kn,” “n”
- **Line 23:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 24:** “gr”
- **Line 25:** “gr”
- **Line 26:** “gr,” “p,” “p”
- **Line 28:** “d,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 29:** “c,” “k,” “l”
- **Line 30:** “n,” “L,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 31:** “w,” “w,” “f,” “w,” “ll,” “f,” “l”
- **Line 32:** “b,” “B,” “p”
- **Line 33:** “B,” “w,” “w,” “P”
- **Line 34:** “r,” “p,” “rp,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 35:** “n,” “n”
- **Line 36:** “n,” “Q,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 37:** “C,” “d,” “nd,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 38:** “r,” “r,” “i”
- **Line 39:** “ S,” “w,” “n,” “s,” “b,” “r,” “z,” “s,” “b,” “l,” “n”
- **Line 40:** “r,” “r,” “d,” “r,” “s,” “l,” “ms,” “d,” “w,” “n,” “d,” “n,” “m,” “ss,” “w,” “s”
- **Line 41:** “w,” “f,” “w,” “f”
- **Line 42:** “s,” “f,” “nc,” “s,” “s,” “n,” “b,” “gh,” “s”
- **Line 43:** “B,” “mb,” “m,” “ss,” “ss,” “s,” “w”
- **Line 44:** “ W,” “w,” “th,” “s,” “s,” “th,” “w,” “s”
- **Line 45:** “Th,” “th,” “th,” “th,” “w”
- **Line 46:** “W,” “th,” “th,” “st,” “l,” “l,” “t”
- **Line 47:** “ F,” “st,” “f,” “l,” “ts,” “l”
- **Line 48:** “d,” “m,” “d,” “M,” “s,” “ld,” “s,” “ld”
- **Line 49:** “m,” “m,” “s,” “r,” “s,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 50:** “m,” “rm,” “r,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “mm,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 51:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 52:** “h,” “h,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 53:** “ll,” “m,” “m,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 54:** “T,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 56:** “p,” “p”
- **Line 57:** “p,” “s”
- **Line 58:** “s,” “st,” “s”
- **Line 59:** “St,” “st,” “s,” “v,” “v”
- **Line 61:** “b,” “d,” “B,” “d”
- **Line 64:** “p”
- **Line 65:** “P,” “ps,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “p,” “th”
- **Line 66:** “Thr,” “th,” “s,” “r,” “R,” “th,” “s,” “ck”
- **Line 67:** “s,” “d,” “d,” “n,” “c,” “n”
- **Line 68:** “ Th,” “ s,” “th,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “m,” “th”
- **Line 69:** “m,” “m,” “c,” “c,” “s,” “m,” “ts,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “f,” “m”
- **Line 70:** “f,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “f,” “l,” “n,” “s,” “f,” “rl,” “rn”
- **Line 71:** “F,” “rl,” “n,” “li,” “b,” “ll”
- **Line 72:** “T,” “t,” “ll,” “b,” “s,” “l,” “s,” “l,” “f”
- **Line 73:** “f,” “c,” “s”
- **Line 74:** “f,” “d,” “d,” “c,” “f”
- **Line 75:** “d,” “d,” “p,” “f,” “d”
- **Line 76:** “P,” “st,” “st”
- **Line 77:** “s,” “d,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 78:** “d”
- **Line 79:** “W,” “s,” “s,” “w,” “d”
- **Line 80:** “d,” “s,” “s,” “D”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "Ode to a Nightingale," mostly as a way of allowing phrases and sentences to vary in length and not be too boxed in by the stanza form. In a few instances, though, the enjambment also enhances the content of the poem. In lines 7 and 8, for example, the speaker describes the nightingale bird and its song. Here, two lines in a row are

enjambed, allowed to flow freely and anticipate the "full-throated ease" with which the bird sings:

> That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
> In some melodious plot
> Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,

Sometimes, enjambment does the exact opposite, helping the poem deliberately *disrupt* its flow. At the end of line 23, for example, enjambment sets up an awkwardly placed caesurae that helps convey tiredness and the suffering of humanity (sickness, aging, and so on):

> The weariness, the fever, and the fret
> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Later, at the end of line 39, enjambment comes after the phrase "breezes blown." This is like a gust of wind blowing through the poem, as though removing the typical comma at the end of the line and creating a clearing between this line and the next.

Line 57's enjambment mirrors the example in lines 7 and 8 outlined above: with the focus on bird song comes the loosening (the increased freedom) of the poetic line:

> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy!

Perhaps the enjambment in the final stanza works towards this aim as well. Here, a number of lines are enjambed, perhaps signifying the nightingale's freedom to fly away from the speaker—and thereby confirm its freedom from pesky human concerns.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pains"
- **Line 2:** "My"
- **Line 3:** "drains"
- **Line 4:** "One"
- **Line 7:** "trees"
- **Line 8:** "In," "plot"
- **Line 9:** " Of"
- **Line 11:** "been"
- **Line 12:** "Cool'd"
- **Line 21:** "forget"
- **Line 22:** "What"
- **Line 23:** "fret"
- **Line 24:** "Here"
- **Line 27:** "sorrow"
- **Line 28:** "And"
- **Line 39:** " blown"
- **Line 40:** "Through"
- **Line 43:** " sweet"
- **Line 44:** "Wherewith," "endows"
- **Line 45:** "The"
- **Line 51:** " time"
- **Line 52:** " I"
- **Line 57:** "abroad"
- **Line 58:** "In"
- **Line 63:** "heard"
- **Line 64:** "In"
- **Line 65:** "path"
- **Line 66:** " Through"
- **Line 68:** "hath"
- **Line 69:** "foam"
- **Line 70:** " Of "
- **Line 71:** "bell"
- **Line 72:** " To"
- **Line 73:** "well"
- **Line 74:** " As"
- **Line 75:** "fades"
- **Line 76:** " Past"
- **Line 77:** "deep"
- **Line 78:** " In"

HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is used once in "Ode to a Nightingale." This is in line 61, when the speaker calls the nightingale an "immortal Bird." Obviously, no bird is immortal—but that's not really the speaker's point.

There are a few factors to consider here. Firstly, this is the stanza in which the speaker thinks back to "ancient days" and biblical times (with the specific allusion to the biblical book of Ruth). The speaker imagines the nightingale's song being heard back then, and this song being essentially the same: mysterious, beautiful, and comforting. The reference to immortality, then, is an exaggerated way of admiring the nightingale's continuity through the centuries (especially when compared to the huge changes that humanity has undergone!).

The hyperbole also speaks to the way that the speaker worries about time and impermanence. Throughout the poem, the speaker worries about the way that all living things decay and die—this "immortality," then, is the logical ideal that the speaker seems to long for.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 61:** "immortal Bird"

PARADOX

There is one notable example of paradox in "Ode to a Nightingale," which appears in lines 5 to 6 in the first stanza. Here, the speaker claims to be "too happy in thine happiness." That is, the speaker is so happy to hear the happy sounds of the

nightingale that the speaker is actually *too* happy. How can a person be too happy? Well, really, they can't; if someone is *too* happy, that happiness typically begins to tip over into different emotions—anxiety, sadness, envy, etc.

This feeling of being paradoxically "too happy" that the nightingale has such a "happy lot" explains the beginning of the stanza, in which the speaker outlines a melancholy and "drowsy" state of mind. The speaker insists that they feel no envy towards the nightingale—in which the speaker sees a symbol of freedom and beauty—but perhaps something more is going on subconsciously. Indeed, as the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that the speaker *is* in a way envious of the bird, mainly because its beauty seems unmatchable and, in addition, far more timeless than anything the speaker could come up with (as a poet).

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness,"

PERSONIFICATION

There are a number of instances of personification throughout "Ode to a Nightingale." In a way, the nightingale itself is personified. This is partly because the speaker addresses it through language, as though it might be able to understand. That said, it's also worth bearing in mind that the nightingale probably isn't aware of the speaker's presence anyway, and is addressed by apostrophe throughout. Line 7's comparison of the nightingale to a "Dryad" is a partial personification, though, in that dryads are human-like spirits that dwell in the forest.

The next key example is in lines 29 and 30, when "Beauty" and "Love" are both personified. By being portrayed as human, both figures become mortal and, like people, are doomed to "fade," age, and eventually but inevitably, die.

In the fourth stanza, the moon and the stars are then personified. Like the reference to dryads in stanza one, this isn't quite *pure* personification, and could also be considered *deification* (metaphorical transformation into a god-like being). The moon is the queen of the night sky, surrounded by her "starry" fairies. This is a highly supernatural moment and is part of a brief but important shift in the poem; here, the speaker momentarily believes that, through poetry, the speaker can "fly" with the nightingale. This slip into fantasy, then, is part of the speaker's efforts to prove this belief true.

The other key example is line 52. Here, it's "Death's" turn to be personified (signaled by the capitalization of the word). This moment is mostly about the speaker admitting a certain fascination with death, finding some comfort in the thought that eventually the speaker will no longer possess human consciousness (and all the agony that comes with it).

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-10:** "'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness,— / That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless, / Singest of summer in full-throated ease."
- **Lines 29-30:** " Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow."
- **Lines 36-37:** " And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, / Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;"
- **Lines 51-54:** "and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death, / Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme, / To take into the air my quiet breath;"

REPETITION

There are a few key examples of repetition in "Ode to a Nightingale." In the first stanza, line 6 repeats the word "happy" from line 5, using a technique known as diacope. This contrasts two different types of happiness. The first is the one that the speaker *perceives* in the figure of the nightingale and its song. The singing seems to represent beauty, purity, and freedom—all things that the speaker feels equate to a kind of happiness (and attributing happiness to the bird is also a type of personification).

The *speaker's* happiness, however, is tinged with sadness ("My heart aches"). This shows that, though the speaker professes not to be envious, there is something about the nightingale's happiness that the speaker longs to possess. As the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that this difference is based on the way that the speaker cannot escape the world of human suffering and consciousness—whereas the nightingale seems free from these.

In two instances in the poem, the last line of one stanza sets up the first line of the next. This occurs between stanzas two and three, with the "fade away" of line 20 expanded into "fade far away" in line 21. This embodies the speaker's wish to escape the human world, and somehow join the nightingale in its freedom. The other example is between the last two stanzas with the repeat of "forlorn." This is technically known as anadiplosis—when one sentence begins with the last word of the previous sentence. This not only adds dramatic weight to the word, but sets up the simile that compares the word itself to a "bell" that "toll[s]" the speaker back into the speaker's "sole self." In other words, the repetition of "forlorn" underscores the speaker's *separation* from the nightingale as it now flies away, leaving the speaker a solitary and melancholy figure. This separation is also made clear through another repetition in line 75: "Adieu! Adieu!" This epizeuxis makes the goodbye seem all

the more final.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "happy"
- **Line 6:** "happy," "happiness"
- **Line 20:** "fade away"
- **Line 21:** "Fade far away"
- **Line 31:** "Away! away!"
- **Line 70:** "forlorn"
- **Line 71:** "Forlorn"
- **Line 75:** "Adieu! adieu!"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Ode to a Nightingale" has two rhetorical questions, both of which come at the end of the poem. The placement of these questions is important. It's clear from the opening of the poem onwards that the speaker has deep-rooted philosophical questions, answers to which *almost* seem to come from the beauty of the nightingale's song. Throughout the poem, the speaker professes anxieties about time, death, beauty, and the suffering that comes with consciousness and merely being human. At times, the speaker nearly finds some kind of answer or solution to these anxieties—for example, the speaker briefly thinks poetry can help the speaker achieve a beauty equal to the nightingale's song, before dismissing this as "deceiving" "fancy" in the end of the poem. This leads the speaker to question the entire experience that has unfolded during the poem:

> Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
> Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

The nightingale, the object of the speaker's contemplation, is now gone. This leaves the speaker pretty much where the speaker started, lost in life's deepest questions. Now, though, the speaker wonders whether the whole experience was reality or just an illusion—the music is "fled," and so too are the brief ghosts of answers that had appeared here and there during the experience.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 79-80:** "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?"

SIMILE

Simile is used twice in "Ode to a Nightingale." The first example is in the first stanza:

> My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
> My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
> Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
> One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

The simile, highlighted above, compares the speaker's melancholy mood to the effects of intoxicants, whether poison hemlock, a "dull opiate," or the waters of Lethe (the mythological river with properties that make the drinker forget their identity). The simile here signals that the speaker is not *actually* intoxicated, but is made to *feel* that way by the purity and beauty of the nightingale's song. This then sets up the speaker's longing for drunkenness described in the following stanza (which is not to be taken too literally, but more as a longing to achieve some kind of ideal state).

Creating a neat mirror to the first stanza, the other simile comes in the final stanza of the poem. This compares the word "forlorn" to "a bell" that sends the speaker crashing back down to earth. The speaker's previous contemplation of the nightingale's immortality, and the brief peace and understanding that it intermittently offered, is over. The nightingale has "fled," leaving the speaker to cut a solitary figure in the dark forest. Comparing this moment to the ringing of a bell marks that it is a solemn occasion, even a kind of death (bells are often used at funerals). This is not a *literal* death, but more a marking of the end of the nightingale-speaker relationship—which may have only been "a waking dream" in the first place.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains / One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:"
- **Lines 71-72:** "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!"

VOCABULARY

Hemlock (Line 2) - Hemlock is a poisonous plant, famously ingested by Socrates as a means of committing suicide.

Opiate (Line 3) - A drug from the opioid family, which includes heroin and morphine.

Lethe-wards (Line 4) - Towards Lethe. Lethe is a river in the Greek mythological underworld. Drinking its waters obliterates the drinker's mind, making them forget their identity.

Thy/thine (Line 5, Line 6) - Archaic form of "your."

Lot (Line 5) - Another word for situation/life experiences, referring to the nightingale and contrasting with the "wear[y]" lot of humankind.

Thou (Line 7) - An archaic form of "you."

Light-winged Dryad (Line 7) - A dryad is a tree nymph. They

are usually female and human in appearance; they guard the forest and are notoriously elusive (like the nightingale).

Beechen green (Line 9) - A green patch of land surrounded by beech trees.

Draught of vintage (Line 11) - A drink of vintage wine.

Hath (Line 11) - Has.

Deep-delved (Line 12) - This refers to the vintage wine being cooled and stored in the depths of the earth (an exaggeration of storing wine in a cellar).

Flora (Line 13) - Flora is a Roman goddess of plants and flowers.

Provençal (Line 14) - An adjective denoting that something is from Provence, a temperate region of south-eastern France. As with many other parts of France, it's renowned for its wine!

Mirth (Line 14) - Cheerful amusement.

Beaker (Line 15) - A glass.

The warm South (Line 15) - Probably extending the earlier reference to Provence to other areas in southern Europe—for example, Greece (where the "Hippocrene" is situated).

Hippocrene (Line 16) - Another (Greek) mythological water source. Drinking from the Hippocrene spring is said to grant the drinker poetic inspiration.

Fret (Line 23) - Worry.

Palsy (Line 25) - Paralysis.

Spectre (Line 26) - A ghost.

Leaden-eyed despairs (Line 28) - Eyes heavy with depression and worry.

Bacchus and his pards (Line 32) - Bacchus, a.k.a Dionysus, is the Greek god of wine and revelry. He is sometimes depicted riding a chariot pulled by leo-"pards."

Poesy (Line 33) - Poetry.

Retards (Line 34) - Makes slow.

Starry Fays (Line 37) - The stars, here depicted as fairies.

Verdurous (Line 40) - Green and luscious.

Embalmed darkness (Line 43) - The surrounding darkness which covers everything.

Seasonable (Line 44) - Relating to the turning of the seasons, but also meaning timely.

Hawthorn/Eglantine/Violets/Musk-rose (Line 46, Line 47, Line 49) - Various beautiful flowers with pleasant fragrances.

Murmurous (Line 50) - This means the flies collectively make a low-sounding noise.

Darkling (Line 51) - Darkening, probably relating to the speaker's mood. This can also be a noun referring to something that is characterized by darkness.

Easeful (Line 52) - Restful and quiet.

A mused rhyme (Line 53) - Partly relating to poetic inspiration from the muses, but also possibly a pun on the word "amused"—as though the speaker knows that these verses about death are somewhat naive.

Abroad (Line 57) - Far away, as if in a different land.

Ectsacy (Line 58) - Extreme joy or bliss.

High requiem (Line 60) - A requiem is a piece of music that remembers the dead (or an individual who has died). "High" works both as suggesting the *quality* of the nightingale's song *and* the fact the bird sings high up in the trees.

Sod (Line 60) - A piece of the ground.

Ruth (Line 66) - A character from the Bible. She was widowed, and chose to take care of her mother-in-law rather than return to her hometown.

Alien corn (Line 67) - A field of corn, alien because it is in a foreign land (not the place where Ruth comes from).

Oft-times (Line 68) - Often.

Casements (Line 69) - Windows.

Forlorn (Line 70, Line 71) - Mournful and depressed.

Adieu (Line 73, Line 75) - Goodbye.

Fancy (Line 73) - The human imagination.

Plaintive anthem (Line 75) - Sad and mournful music. "Anthem" also works because the nightingale's song is a symbol of its identity, like a national anthem for a country.

Valley-glades (Line 78) - The next fields along, which are hilly.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As the title suggests, this poem is an ode. The ode is a verse form that dates back to ancient Greece. Keats's poem consists of eight stanzas of ten lines apiece, making this the longest of his odes.

The first stanza discusses the speaker's "drowsy numbness" brought on by the beauty of the nightingale's song; in the second, the speaker longs for intoxication to dim the speaker's senses and conscious mind, so that the speaker can escape the suffering of the human world (stanza three). Stanza four is a brief but vital shift, and sees the speaker momentarily believing that poetry ("Poesy") can bring about comfort. The speaker puts this faith in poetry into practice in stanza five, conjuring a rich and sensuous vision of the forest through beautiful word selection; then, in stanza six, the speaker's mood darkens again. In stanza seven, the speaker weighs up the unchanging nature of the nightingale's song through the ages against the tiring and turbulent human world. Finally, in stanza eight, the speaker is

pretty much back where things started—only now the temporary beauty and solace offered by the nightingale has "fled" too.

In its original form, the ode was often celebratory; this ode *does* celebrate the beauty of the nightingale's song, but the overall tone is searching and melancholic. The way that the poem seems to meander through different emotions and subjects is part of Keats's attempt to find a form that would suit what he called the *negative capability*. This term relates to an artist's ability to strive for beauty over philosophical certainty, and indeed to not shy away from intellectual confusion or irresolution. Perhaps that's why this poem ends not with a statement, but two rhetorical questions that ask whether the speaker's experience was even real. Likewise, Keats's poem does not fit into the more traditional formats originally established for odes (associated with the ancient poets Homer and Pindar). Keats developed his ode form because he felt that the other established forms did not quite fit what he wanted his poems to do.

One other point worth noting is that odes, in the classical era, were generally sung and/or accompanied by music and dance. Music is an important part of this poem, with the speaker hearing a particular beauty in the nightingale's song that seems to be partly based on the fact that this song doesn't require any language. That is, the song sounds pure and free because it isn't weighed down by words, which would signal the presence of human consciousness.

METER

As with Keats's other odes, "Ode to a Nightingale" is mostly written in iambic pentameter. Recall that iambic pentameter just means that there are five poetic feet per line, each with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern (da-DUM). Line 2 provides a clear example:

> My sense, | as though | of hem- | lock I | had drunk,

The general regularity of the meter has a hypnotic effect on the reader which, combined with the poem's sensuous sound, is intended to draw the reader into the poem in the same way that the nightingale's song has caught the attention of the speaker.

That's not to say that there aren't a number of metrical variations throughout. In the very first line, for example, the second foot is actually a trochee (stressed-unstressed), helping focus attention on the speaker's aching heart before returning to the steady iambic meter:

> My heart | aches, and | a drow- | sy numb- | ness pains

Another interesting variation comes in line 10:

> Singest | of sum- | mer in | full-throat- | ed ease.

The trochee at the start of the line (Singest) makes the line feel more active, conveying the way that the nightingale's song is both instinctive and "full-throated." In the nightingale's song the speaker hears a kind of freedom, and this is reflected in the loosening of the iambic pentameter in this line. It's worth comparing this line to the last, in which another trochee highlights "Fled" at the start of the first foot. Again, this seems to underscore the bird's freedom and, in this case, to emphasize the speaker's isolation:

> Fled is | that mu- | sic:—Do | I wake | or sleep?

Little blips in the meter like this pop up throughout the poem to keep things interesting and draw readers' ears to certain phrases, even though overall the iambic pattern stays pretty steady. Eagle-eyed readers will notice, however, that there is one line in each stanza that *doesn't* conform to the pentameter—the eighth line in each stanza. These lines are still iambic, but have only *three* feet, making them iambic *trimeter*. Take line 8 (note that "melodious" scans as having just three syllables):

> In some | melo- | dious plot

And line 16 (which is actually missing a syllable at the end of the line):

> And pur- | ple-stained | mouth;

And line 28:

> And lead- | ened-eyed | despairs,

This variation again keeps things interesting and conveys a sense of virtuosity or skill on the part of the speaker—which is important in a poem that is, at least in part, about the beauty of poetry itself.

RHYME SCHEME

"Ode to a Nightingale" has a regular rhyme scheme throughout. Each of its ten-line stanzas follows the pattern

> ABABCDECDE

This is a fairly ornate pattern that demands a great deal of skill, especially to sustain it over eight stanzas. The poem is in part the speaker's attempt to find a *poetic* equivalent to the pure beauty of the nightingale's song—a project which the speaker ultimately feels is doomed to failure—and the dexterity needed to manage the rhyme scheme is an important part of this desire. In other words, the complicated rhyme scheme showcases the speaker's skill and is meant to highlight the

power and beauty of poetry itself.

Sometimes, the rhyme pairs in themselves tell almost act out the poem miniature. For example, take the third stanza—where the speaker outlines a longing to escape the world of human suffering (and exist in the more pure and natural world of the nightingale). The speaker wishes to "forget" (line 21) the "fret" (line 23) of being human, and longs to have "never known" the "groan[s]" of humanity that represent its suffering. Or, for example, take the rhyme of "self" and "deceiving elf" in lines 72 and 74. This rhyme foregrounds the way that the speaker—the poem's "self"—has been "cheat[ed]" by their imagination ("fancy"), here personified as an "elf." This ties the speaker to the act of deception, underscoring the way that it is ultimately *self*-deception.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Ode to a Nightingale" is never specified, though most critics take it to be Keats himself. The composition of the poem is well-documented: Keats wrote it in the garden of his friend's house, in which a nightingale had nested. Furthermore, the speaker is a poet (see line 33) and also tragically experienced in the world of human suffering and disease (Keats had recently lost his brother to tuberculosis). That said, the poem itself doesn't tell readers the speaker's gender or age.

The poem is told in the first-person, with the speaker speaking to the nightingale through apostrophe. The nightingale, of course, is not a speaker in the poem, but a *singer* that remains oblivious and uninterested in the speaker's doubts and searching questions about the world. The speaker moves through different emotions and states of mind throughout the poem. At times, this person revels in the beauty of the nightingales song. At other points, the speaker longs for intoxication or death to alleviate the pains of being human. Ultimately, the speaker is someone looking for answers—but, as if to underscore the impossibility of finding these answers, the poem ends with two rhetorical questions.

SETTING

"Ode to a Nightingale" is set in a lush forest some time during the spring, in all likelihood, given the references to blooming flowers, the "seasonable month," and "mid-May's eldest child." The forest is both "verdurous"—or very green and full of life—and gloomy, suggesting that the tree canopy is so thick that not much light actually gets through. That said, it's not clear exactly what time of day it is, or how much time passes over the course of the poem: the "shadows" in line 9 suggest some kind of daylight, but the moon in line 36 suggests it may be night (or that the day turns into night as the poem unfolds). And, as the name suggests, nightingales tend to sing at night (their name is Old English for *night singer*; the song is sung by male birds to attract a mate). Generally speaking, the poem does *feel* like it takes place in a dark atmosphere. Indeed, the moon is *imagined* rather than actually *seen*, and the fifth stanza is a powerful evocation of the forest scene told using the speaker's poetic creativity rather than actual sensory information (in other words, the speaker is *imagining* the surrounding scene rather than actually *documenting* it).

There is also an element of fantasy to the poem's setting. This is constructed through allusion to mythology (e.g., Lethe and Hippocrene) and the enchanting effects of the nightingale's music (e.g., the mention of "faery lands" in line 70). The poem is also keen to stress that its central experience—listening to the nightingale's song—is *not* tied to a specific point in time. That is, as the speaker expresses in lines 62-67, the nightingale's song is something that could be heard stretching all the way back to biblical times.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats is one of the most celebrated poets in the English language, and this one of his most celebrated poems. "Ode to a Nightingale" was written in an astonishing burst of creativity during the spring of 1819, during which Keats also wrote his other odes (except for "To Autumn," which was written slightly later, in September of the same year). These other odes include the equally famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode on Melancholy." According to Keats's friend Charles Brown, Keats composed this poem while visiting Brown and spotting a nightingale nearby. Brown said Keats wrote the poem in just a few hours on a couple scraps of paper!

Keats is generally considered a key member of the Romantic poets, in particular of the second generation which included writers like Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Romanticism doesn't mean the same thing as "romantic"—instead, it is characterized, loosely speaking, by a deep-rooted belief in the power of the imagination, the transformative role of poetry in society, the importance of nature, and political engagement.

Keats is also far from the first writer to use the nightingale as a subject. The bird appears in works from the classical era, including Homer's *The Odyssey* and Sophocles's *Tereus*. Keats deliberately seems to distance his nightingale from the most familiar of the mythical nightingale associations, which is the story of Philomela (this appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). Philomela is a princess who is raped and mutilated; she enacts her revenge and is then turned into a nightingale. The nightingale's song thereby becomes a kind of lament, as sorrowful as it is beautiful. While Keats's nightingale does possess these last two characteristics, the poem makes no reference to this particular myth, which would certainly have

been familiar to Keats.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Keats wrote this poem not long after the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, which facilitated Napoleon's rise to power. The early 19th century can be considered a period during which people rethought the way that individuals relate to society. Romanticism, the literary movement of which Keats was a part, was also a response to the rapid industrialization of society and influx of people into cities. As urban centers grew ever more crowded and dirty, artists often began to idealize the countryside and the natural world.

Keats certainly had more than his fair share of bad luck during his lifetime, partly informing his focus on suffering and—in particular—the impermanence of life and beauty. He had already lost both parents and an infant brother, and would himself be dead from tuberculosis within a couple of years of writing this poem. He also struggled financially throughout his life, and was frequently the subject of scorn from the literary establishment (these sorts of critics might well be the "hungry generations [that] tread [the speaker down]" in line 62).

Indeed, the odes were written during a period when Keats thought he would soon be ceasing his writing life. Having borrowed money from his brother, George, and now unable to return the favor, Keats intended to get more financially stable work and give up poetry—but not before writing a few more poems, which, years after his death, became considered some of the best written in the English language.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Stephen Fry Reads the Poem — An excellent reading of "Ode to a Nightingale" by British national treasure Stephen Fry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKVNJH0SbUM)
- A Contemporary's Review of Keats — A link to John Gibson Lockhart's snarky review of Keats's poetry in 1818. (http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?textsid=36160)
- Portrait of John Keats by Joseph Severn — A painting done of Keats by his friend and contemporary Joseph Severn. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03558/John-Keats)
- More From Keats — A link to a detailed biography of Keats as well as more poems, including his other odes. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)
- Singing with the Nightingales — A beautiful recording first broadcast in 1924. This is a collaboration between a nightingale and a cello! (https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b044m17b)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Melancholy
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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