



## STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF KEATS' ODE TO NIGHTINGALE

**DR. RAJKUMAR M. LAKHADIVE**

Head & Associate Professor, Department of English,  
Mahatma Basweshwar College, Latur. MS (INDIA)

### ABSTRACT

*Ode to a Nightingale is the longest and one of the best of Keats's odes. Keats had experimented with the ode-form, and developed the ode-stanza suited to his purpose, in the Ode to Psyche. Then in the Summer of 1819, he composed four odes: To a Nightingale, on a Grecian Urn, On Melancholy and on Indolence in a rapid succession. Of these, the Ode to Nightingale was composed in a remarkable burry. This ode is thematically and technically among the best two or three of his odes. It deals with Keats' usual preoccupations with the contraries of life such as the ideal and the real, the imaginary and the actual, joy and sorrow, permanence and transience, the timeless and the temporal, and so on. According to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren observe: "Ode to a Nightingale is a very rich poem. It contains some complications which we must not gloss over if we are to appreciate the depth and significance of the issues engaged. One of these complications has to do with the close connection between pleasure and pain; another, with that between life and death."*

Stylistics is a difficult area to define in exact terms as it draws on several disciplines and has a vast application to both literary and non-literary texts. G.W. Turner defines Stylistics as: ". . . that part of linguistics which concentrates on variation in the use of language, often but not exclusively with special attention to the most conscious and complex use of language in literature." (Turner, G. W. 1973: 7) According to Raymond Chapman: "The linguistic study of different styles is called stylistics." (Chapman, Raymond. 1973: 11) To Widdowson, 'Stylistics' means the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation and he takes the view that what distinguishes Stylistics from literary criticism on the one hand and linguistics, on the other, is that it is a means of linking the two. Several other scholars have tried to define the term stylistics, though it is not surprising that an agreed definition remains impossible." (Widdowson, H. G. 1975: 75-76) Wales (2001) in the first edition of her *Dictionary of Stylistics* as: ". . . a discipline principally concerned with describing the formal features of texts and the functional significance of these features in relation to the interpretation of the text." (Wales. 2001.)

John Keats poetry is the compendium of the innovative use of verbal material to produce the desired effect on the readers. He organizes language resources to express his experience in a

skilful and decisive way. He developed his own Keatsean style from the poetry of his mature times. While outlining the features of Keats' style Garrett Stewart observes in his concentrated article, 'Keats and Language': "Trained as a physician, self-schooled as a poet, Keats was an intuitive anatomist of language, its closely articulated structure, its ligaments and fibers, its muscular tensions and release, its rhythmic corridors of breath- while also a genetic specialist in its origins and mutations. With pen rather than stethoscope, he took the phonetic pulse of his every word through the listening ear of script." (*Cambridge Companion*. 2001: 135)

John Keats wrote with amazing felicity of words, he made optimum use of verbal gifts that he had possessed. Broadly speaking, Keats' characteristic style developed from the writing of *Isabella*. This style has a suggestive power of image that can draw intense emotional and imaginative response. His style forces the reader to secure identification with the world of experiences that his poetry creates. His poetry before *Hyperion*, is characterized by the subjective element as he seems more empathic than sympathetic. His use of *y-ending* adjectives, adverbs made from participles, abstract nouns, the use of conventional props in his imagery were the characteristics of his style during this immature period. It is clear that Keats was under the influence of Leigh Hunt and that both Keats and Hunt had tried in their respective styles to break away from the neoclassical devices of verse writing, especially, heroic couplet. Keats' Odes have for long been placed at the center of his poetic achievement. Odes are distinguished by a deep poignancy of feeling, a rich strain of meditation and a solemn splendor of imagery. They express the poet's keen sense of the beauty of nature, art and mythology. They express his intuitive recognition of the fundamental mystery of beauty.

Keats' Odes, argues Graham Hough, 'are closely bound up with the theme of transience and permanency.' (Hough, G. 1969) Keats has an intense sensitiveness to joy, but this joy is mingled with a peculiar kind of sadness which appears to be informed with the misery of whole humanity. These are traditional views about Odes and they focus more on the thematic concerns. These Odes are the expression in varying keys of emotion of a mind which has loved the principle of beauty in all things, and seeks in a world of change and decay, among the fleeting forms of loveliness, for something permanent and eternal.

Keats' Odes reveal the mixed feelings of joy and sadness. They represent Keats' emotional reaction to the beauties of nature, art, the mutability of life and evanescence of pleasure. Keats' poetry has been variously interpreted. Critics have followed different frames for their analysis of the Odes like historical, psychological, mythological, etc. The Odes have fascinated scholars to interpret in diverse ways. However, there have been more attempts to interpret the thematic concerns of the Odes, their literary merits and aesthetic aspects. Their

structural aspects like diction, stylistic features, verbal arrangement and the innovative use of words to achieve the desired effect have not been exhaustively analyzed.

*Ode to a Nightingale* is the longest and one of the best of Keats's odes. Keats had experimented with the ode-form, and developed the ode-stanza suited to his purpose, in the *Ode to Psyche*. Then in the Summer of 1819, he composed four odes: *To a Nightingale*, *on a Grecian Urn*, *On Melancholy* and *on Indolence* in a rapid succession. Of these, the *Ode to Nightingale* was composed in a remarkable burry. This ode is thematically and technically among the best two or three of his odes. It deals with Keats' usual preoccupations with the contraries of life such as the ideal and the real, the imaginary and the actual, joy and sorrow, permanence and transience, the timeless and the temporal, and so on. According to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren observe: "*Ode to a Nightingale* is a very rich poem. It contains some complications which we must not gloss over if we are to appreciate the depth and significance of the issues engaged. One of these complications has to do with the close connection between pleasure and pain; another, with that between life and death." (Stillinger, Jack. 1987: 45)

It is generally believed that it was the first Ode to be composed after the *Ode to Psyche* between late April and early May, 1819. This longest ode of Keats was written with considerable speed within a few hours of a morning. The death of Keats' brother, Tom, financial difficulties and jealousy in his passion for Fanny Brawne provided the necessary background for the composition of the Ode. The poem suggests a contrast between the mortal state and the world of perfect beauty represented by the song of the Nightingale. John Keats' desire is to reach to this perfect world of the bird's song. First he tries to reach the world with the help of wine and then through poetic imagination. The poet contrasts the transitoriness of human life with permanence of the world of the bird's song.

The ode contains eight regular stanzas of ten lines each. The movement of the thought in the poem is natural and unhampered. In the first stanza, the poet describes his ecstatic experience of listening to the beautiful song of the nightingale. In the ecstatic state, excessiveness of joy makes his heart ache and his senses are numbed. The song of the bird has dulled his brain and dimmed his consciousness and he has become forgetful of the evening. He is in a state of inertia and is led towards oblivion. The inseparability of pain and pleasure is aptly brought out in this stanza.

The poem begins at the height of the empathic experience. And the first stanza of the ode sharply juxtaposes the two empathies—pivoting them on the two central lines: the weighty and sluggish movement of the opening four lines conveying the dull ache of the poet's unnatural strain; the unruffled flow of the last four lines conveying the natural ease with which the bird participates in nature. Thus, the seminal elements of the poem are obvious.

The opposition of pain and numbness in the poet must seek out a resolution. The poet's drive in this direction leads to two crisscrossing movements: the enervation of his passion as he tried to seek- 'ease' from pain; and the increasing intensity of the bird's symbolic values. As the poet aspires to capture the bird's ease, he finds himself moving downward towards mortality and sees the bird as symbolizing proportionately higher levels of meaning.

The second stanza expresses the poet's desire to prolong the state of intoxication, forgetfulness and joy described in the first stanza. With the help of drinks he wants to escape from this mundane world and fade away with the nightingale. In the third stanza, he explains the miseries and sorrows of the world that the nightingale does not know and that he himself wants to forget. There is a sudden shift from the ideal world of the nightingale referred to in the second stanza to the feverish world of harsh realities described in the third stanza.

In the fourth stanza, Keats discards wine or the intoxication caused by it as a means of escape from the realities of the world and relies on poetry and poetic imagination to help him escape the world of the bird. The stanza also builds the opposition between imagination and reason. In the fifth stanza, the poet describes the atmosphere of the dark place where he has now come 'on the viewless wings of Poesy'. The stanza abounds in the element of sensuousness. The appeal to the senses of sight and smell is remarkable in the description of 'darkness' and of 'each sweet' smell.

In the sixth stanza, the poet expresses his intense disgust with the world which leads him to the thoughts of death. For the poet, this is the ideal time of midnight for him to die because the nightingale is pouring forth its music in profuse strains. The nightingale will continue to sing even after the poet's death and that will be the mourning song for the poet. In the seventh stanza, the poet argues that the bird is not subject to death as it is the symbol of immortality and permanence.

In the last stanza, the poet returns to the world of reality from the imagined world of the nightingale. Fancy or imagination cannot hold the poet in thrall permanently and ultimately the poet is released from the spell of poetic imagination. After returning to his senses, the poet finds the nightingale's song fading away. The poet's bidding adieu to the nightingale makes a return to the world of reality. The structure of the *Ode to Nightingale* consists of a circular pattern as in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

The poem suggests the poet's escape into the bird's world of permanence and fancy and also return from that imaginative world to the real world. The poet has a brief excursion in the ideal world of the nightingale. The excursion is momentary and the poet returns to his world. Like the structure of other Odes, *Ode to Nightingale* has the structure that embraces two dominant tendencies—the desire to transcend the world of flux and the desire to mix with



that world. Keats wants to go beyond the bounds of the transient world to the land of the nightingale but reality proves too irresistible and he has to return to his world. As Richard H. Fogle points out: “*The Ode to a Nightingale* contains the highest, the fullest, the most intense, the most valuable mental experience which Keats can imagine. This is its centre, this the basis of its unit.” (Stillinger, Jack. 1987: 40)

This experience is the participation in the life of the nightingale and the ecstatic enjoyment of his song. The structure of the poem helps to highlight this experience through the presentation of various stages of the poet’s sojourn in the land of the nightingale in various stanzas. Beginning with the description of the song of the nightingale and the effect of that song on the poet, the poem proceeds to express his desire to flee from the world with the bird. The mediums of the flight are mentioned in the poem- wine and poetry that can be of help in such flight. This may be called to be the introductory beginning of the poem.

The middle part of the poem deals with the world of the nightingale where the poet has been suddenly transported by his poetic imagination. The climax of the poem comes with the poet describing the song of the bird which has a power to charm magic casements. The anti-climax comes when the poet comes back from the old world of romance to the present world of reality. The parallelism between the worlds of romance and reality is presented through the complex structure of the poem.

The sudden shift of the scene and setting of the poem such as that introduced by the words ‘Already with thee’ in the fourth stanza points to the great speed of imagination that can transport any one to any place in no time. The poem has two settings: the first setting is the actual garden where the poet actually listened to the song of the bird and the second is the imagined garden where he supposes the nightingale to live. About half of the poem is devoted to the actual setting and the remaining half to the imaginary setting. Keats crosses the boundaries of the two settings without much problem in order to reinforce the mood of the poem. W. J. Bate comments on the structure of the poem in the following words: “The ode falls into two almost equal portions, the break coming near the close of the fourth stanza.” (Bate, W. J. 1964: 503)

In the first part, the poet tries to identify himself with the bird and makes an effort to follow it to its land. His is the escape from the world of flux and transitoriness to that of permanence and fixity. The poet crosses the threshold of the imaginary world in the middle of the fourth stanza. But soon, he realizes the momentariness of the escape and returns to the real world.

Till this part of the poem, the poet has a short period of identification with the bird. However, from the fifth stanza onwards, the poet gets his separate identity in the poem. He is only a listener to the song of the bird and the act of listening ends with the poet’s waking to the real

world. The romance of the unseen and strange world of the bird finally comes to an end in the face of the seen and familiar world. This return to physical reality further thaws the static scene and shakes time and space into activity. The poem that began with the burial of the wine in the 'deep-delved earth', now ends with the bird's song—'buried deep' in the valley of glades. It began with the poet's desire to 'fade', now ends with the fading of the song of the bird. The bird's song which was viewed as 'requiem', when the poet had become a 'sod'—now that the poet has come back to 'sole self, has become 'plaintive anthem'.

Finally, the experience of the poem is over and it remains only for the poet's normal self to speculate on it. The poem unfolds at the height of the poet's empathic experience—'My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains my sense', [Line No. 1-2] 'too happy in thy happiness' [Line No. 6] and traces the further journey back homeward to habitual self— 'To toll me back from thee to my sole self' [Line No. 72]

The poet resorts to different means in order to transmute his mixed joy into that of the unmixed 'Singing of summer in full-throated ease' of the nightingale. But the poet seems to be so much obsessed with life's 'weariness, the fever and 'pain' that his every attempt towards achieving 'unmixed joy' is frustrated. Even the passing song of the nightingale is 'plaintive anthem'. The song that gave aching joy at the outset, now gives no relief from the harsh reality. The structural unity of the poem is maintained by the poet's return to the place from where he had taken the flight.

The stanzas are arranged in such a way that the flight and return of the poet can be presented in a circular manner. The state of unconsciousness induced by the nightingale's song is continued through the shift from reality to imagination and vice versa to the end in the form of the semi-conscious state of the poet that is caused by the fading of the song. The unity of thought is maintained through the unity of structure. As in the earlier Odes, the title of this ode is suggestive of the mood it depicts. The relation of the poet with the bird is indicated by the use of the preposition 'to' in the title. The relation is both in terms of attachment and identification with the bird. This relation moves from the strong desire to identify with the bird, the momentary identification and the non-identification.

The progression like the beginning, middle and the end is obvious in the poem but that is not characterized by any massive turn. There is only an extension of the mood and that is suggested by the high frequency conjunction, 'and'. There is ample use of sensory images in the poem and they contrast with the abstract or psychological images. 'A draught of vintage cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth', 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim', 'purple stained mouth', are the images that immediately activate our senses and make us feel them. But the image like, 'Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam' creates a very romantic, pleasant and jubilant mood and it is Keats' creative gift.



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