

## Men and Tools in “Ode to a Nightingale”

In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats walks the line between what is man-made through imagination and what is immortal by nature, and questions the particular gifts of both. He finds that the nightingale has abilities that Keats does not, which he imagines create a blissful connection to the natural world. The poem takes a journey through a fantasy where Keats attempts to use man-made tools; wine and poesy, to achieve some union with what is purely natural. His tools are tempered with nature, but are in essence man-made and created with imagination and “fancy,” (73). Here, Keats conflicts with his contemporaries, in that he tries to use the human focused tools he has, rather than join completely with nature. He envies the nightingale, but his solution is not to try to become it, rather, his awareness of mortality prompts him to imagine the human ways he could achieve the same unity with nature.

He begins by introducing why the nightingale’s song is so intoxicating and “immortal,” (61) by explaining his feelings about what the nightingale represents, and why it might sing, “Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness” (Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” 216-18). In these lines, Keats shows why he believes the nightingale sings. The bird sings because it, having no knowledge of death or other human ways of being, cannot want for anything. The “shadows numberless” (9) of the natural world cannot have the same dark, deathly connotations for the nightingale that they do for the author because the bird has no concept of time and represents nature’s lack of time. These lines also foreshadow the author’s ecstatic vision later in the poem, when he achieves for a moment what the nightingale experiences forever: a lack of time and perception of imminent death that allows him to fully appreciate the sublime natural world.

After he has sufficiently described what the Nightingale achieves without trying, he begins attempting to use his human tools. He begins with wine. Wine numbs his awareness of mortality, but does not completely remove it. His goal is to “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget, / What thou among the leaves hast never known” (Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” 216-18). In the beginning of part three, Keats connects his ideas of fading into nature and the world of the Nightingale with the human instrument of wine, which he says is “Cool’d long age in the deep-delved earth,” (12). So the wine has been imbued with aspects of nature as well. His desire to “fade far away” (21). Nature is a place he has to travel *to*, and to do this he must push ideas of nature and death out of his mind. In the second line of this quote, he references again the nightingale’s inability to contemplate its own mortality.

Kappel references this in his discussion of the word dryad as “a creature whose being is that of the tree it inhabits,” (Kappel 273). The same can be seen here, because it is a creature “among the leaves” (22) and therefore of the leaves and of nature. The bird is inextricable from nature, already dissolved into it. The “actual” nature of the nightingale is something the reader may be familiar with. It is, as Fogle states,

“...the real norm--the physical face of nature, nature as it appears to the Romantic imagination--and wholeness and intensity are attributes of nature, as are freedom, ease, spontaneity, harmony, and sobriety,” (Fogle 220).

That the Nightingale does not have to use tools to achieve this is perhaps what truly makes it a being in and of nature. Nature in the way that the nightingale has it, is perhaps completely out of reach. Yet he challenges the nightingale, “Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,/Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards./But on the viewless wings of poesy,” (Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” 216-18).

As wine does not stimulate his imagination, he instead uses poetry. Unlike Wordsworth and Shelley, he does not use poetry to connect to or proselytize about nature. He wants to join nature in a human way. He can achieve this through his imagination. Using poetry to feel the world in the way that the nightingale does allows him to build an imaginary nature, one that is natural for him to inhabit. It is peculiar though, that he chooses the word “viewless,” (33) as Keats is known for his panoramic, lush language, and uses it in this poem, “But in embalmed darkness guess each sweet”(Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” 216-18). His next stanza is sightless, focusing on his lack of light to see the beauty of nature with smell and taste. He uses the word “embalmed” (43) to describe this darkness, which of course immediately calls up connotations of death and dying, the very idea he is trying to avoid in his fantasy. Embalmed also carries with it connotations of purity and calmness. The body is literally filled and set with a “balm,” giving it peace and removing the dirty idea of decomposition.

This is when he confesses that he views death as another tool he can use to join nature, “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time/I have been half in love with easeful Death,” (Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” 216-18). In the first line, he may be referring to himself: his thoughts grow darker as he listens to the song and realizes his desire for death, or to the bird as a creature who creates and facilitates dark thoughts through its beautiful song. The Nightingale is ignorant of its immortality and bliss. This makes the author confess considering death as an option. It is an ignorant state, even if it does not connect him with nature--this is why he is only half in love. He describes death as “easeful” (52) showing that he views it as a respite, an easy way to achieve his goal of sharing himself with the natural world. Though he wishes that this were the solution, he

knows that the only way to achieve this “natural” state requires harder work, and that death has no guarantee of a connection. Death is the solution that is not a solution, and requires no effort in the way that poetry does. It does not numb like wine, nor stimulate his imagination. It is a sort of immortality, but for all he knows, not the immortality that the bird has. He as a human was born to eventually die, but the bird has some offering to nature that keeps it immortal, “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird! / No hungry generations tread thee down;” (Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” 216-18).

This line has troubled many critics, Kappel argues,

“The nightingale, as the being ‘not born for death,’ who does not know death, is the object of emulation. Its immortality is simply and exactly its ignorance of death; it is not an ultimate longevity, has, in fact, nothing to do with duration but instead with quality of existence,” (Kappel 276).

This makes it somewhat troubling that Keats has been “half in love with easeful death” (52) if it is only the idea or lack of it that makes someone immortal or not. And if Keats’ tools work, either wine or poetry or death, don’t they work because they acknowledge the idea of death?

Then perhaps, what Keats means by “the fancy cannot cheat so well/as she is fam’d to do” (63) is instead that a world where he can contemplate death is ultimately more complicated or intriguing because death prompts his use of tools, and in turn, his poetry. Fogle says of this line that it “is not a rejection of imagination, but part of the total experience,” (Fogle 217), which seems to accept all of these tools, these parts, as part of a whole and common experience when a human tries to become something it is inherently not. The imagination failing is a part of the human experience too.

Whether Keats means that the bird itself is immortal, the song is immortal, or it is generationally immortal, “by this point the immortality of the bird is a given, (Kappel 277). All agree that this demonstrates the birds meaning as immortal nature, that it as a being of nature, without sense of time or reason for being, is somehow immortal to Keats, and its state is what he wishes he could achieve.

By the end of the poem, after he is ripped from his fantasy by his own word “forlorn” (71), he asks, “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep?” (Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” 216-18).

The final line, “do I wake or sleep” (80), asks the reader if the whole experience was real or a dream, but it also denotes a choice for the author: what should his next move be to return to the nature he has imagined? Does he even want to? He must choose to use death as an “easeful” (52) tool to achieve something closer to this end, or continue on this path of human mortality and imagination.

Keats finds that to achieve any semblance of what he envies in the Nightingale, he has to use human tools to human ends. As the poem progresses, he cycles through wine, poetry, and death as possible methods, achieving only transitory success. Through this process, the abilities of humans to create a similar experience through their imagination is revealed. The use of this tool is only prompted through the very aspect of humanity that his representation of the nightingale lacks, which is an awareness of mortality and desire for the impossible lack of that awareness.

## Works Cited

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