

John Keats (1795-1821): “Ode to a Nightingale”

- I. Keats is one of our youngest poets, died at age 25
 - A. Major career extended from 1814-1820, or up until the age of 24
 - B. Chaucer hadn't written anything by age 24, and Shakespeare had written only a few early works by that age
 - C. Keats was the most working class of the Romantic poets, along with John Clare
 - D. He was derisively called the “Cockney Poet” by some critics
 - E. He was the son of a livery stable keeper
 - F. His father died when he was 9, his mother died of consumption (tuberculosis) when he was 14
 - G. Keats was apprenticed for medical training, and became an apothecary
 - H. The medical hierarchy of the time:
 - 1. Physicians were the most prestigious graduates of the College of Physicians
 - 2. Surgeons set bones and did more routine medical work
 - 3. Apothecaries were more or less the general practitioners of their day
 - I. Keats abandoned a medical career to write poetry
 - J. Used many forms and modes of poetry, including sonnets and Spenserian stanzas
 - K. While some conservative reviewers denounced him because of social class, many liberals objected to his formal stylistics, language, and mythological allusions
 - L. Percy Shelley's poem, *Adonais*, is an elegy for Keats, whom he suggests was killed by hostile reviewers
 - M. First published poem was “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,” published in 1816
 - 1. Keats didn't read Greek, so his first encounter with Homer was in seventeenth-century George Chapman translation
 - 2. Poem's reference to “stout Cortez” seeing the Pacific Ocean for the first time was regarded by Tennyson and others as a mistake
 - a) Balboa, and not Cortez, was the first European to see the Pacific
 - b) Reference is sometimes regarded as evidence of Keats's limited education
 - c) More recent scholars see Keats using reference as a sophisticated analogy
 - d) Keats was first encountering Homer, who had been seen by others
 - e) Just as Cortez is first seeing an ocean that others had previously seen

II. “Ode to a Nightingale”

- A. One of several odes, all written in a single year
- B. The mythology of the nightingale and the story of Philomela
 - 1. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, King Tereus raped his wife's sister and then cut out her tongue
 - 2. Philomela wove her story into a tapestry
 - 3. When her sister, Procne, learned of it, she killed Tereus's son and fed him to his father
 - 4. Gods turned sisters into birds to save them, Procne into a swallow, and Philomela into a nightingale
 - 5. Philomela's sorrow is supposed to be the source of the nightingale's song's beauty
 - 6. Philomela story is a recurring theme in much English poetry, including T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

- C. "Ode to a Nightingale" is a kind of trance poem, where the senses are pushed to extremes
 - 1. The speaker lies on the boundary between waking and sleeping
 - 2. The speaker is in search of an organic relationship with nature that transcends time
- D. First stanza refers to "drowsy numbness . . . as though of hemlock I had drunk"
- E. Second stanza is filled with imagery of wine and taste
 - 1. "Tasting of Flora and the country green" and "O for a beaker full of the warm South" are examples of *synesthesia*
 - 2. Synesthesia is the phenomenon in which a sense impression of one sense stimulates another sense
 - 3. Some people see different colors when they hear different musical pitches or when they taste different foods
 - 4. A small percentage of the population has one or more of these forms of synesthesia
 - 5. Many scholars believe Keats may have as well
- F. In the second stanza, the speaker wants to leave the world unseen and fade away into the forest, to join his consciousness with that of the nightingale
- G. In the third stanza, he wants to turn off his conscious mind that is full of sorrow, the misery of humanity
- H. In the fourth stanza, he joins his mind with the nightingale, through poetry, though, and not wine
- I. In stanza five, he has moved from the previous stanza, where there is no light, to this world of smell; much olfactory imagery
- J. That transitions, in turn, into images of sound, "The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves," that leads nicely into the next stanza
- K. In stanza six, he is thinking of the song of the nightingale, which has no words, but is ecstatic and beautiful
- L. Stanza seven contains an allusion to the book of Ruth, in the Hebrew Bible, ending with the phrase, "in faery lands forlorn"
- M. The word *forlorn* (language) brings him back to the world and to himself, in stanza eight
- N. He is unsure whether he has had a vision or a waking dream, or whether he has been asleep