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ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE - JOHN KEATS

- ❖ Keats was an **English Romantic poet**.
- ❖ He is regarded as the **romantic poet of second generation** along with Shelley & Byron.
- ❖ He was born in **Moorgate London**.
- ❖ He was a medical student at Guy's Hospital.
- ❖ He wrote his first poem "**An Imitation of Spenser**" in 1814.
- ❖ He was inspired by **Leigh Hunt and Byron**.
- ❖ In 1816, Leigh Hunt agreed to publish his sonnet "**Solitude**" in his magazine "**The Examiner**".
- ❖ His friend **Charles Cowder Clarke** described this day of publication of poetry as a 'Red Letter Day'.
- ❖ All the works of Keats were mostly written and published during the last 5 years of his life.
- ❖ The "**Three Young Poets**" is a collaborative work of Shelley, Keats, and Reynolds, published by Hunt.
- ❖ "**On First Looking at Chapman's Homer**" is a sonnet by Keats. All together he wrote 64 sonnets.
- ❖ John Keats is reputed for his Hellenic spirit.
- ❖ "Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know"
 - These are the ending lines of the "Ode on Grecian Urn".
- ❖ He died of Tuberculosis.
- ❖ His tombstone reads - "**Here lies one, whose name was writ in the water**".
- ❖ Shelley memorized Keats in his poem "**Adonais**".
- ❖ The year 1819 is called "**Annus Mirabilis**" because he wrote most of his important poems in this year.
- ❖ He fell in love with Fanny Browne but she did not respond his love.
- ❖ He was one among the **Cockney poets**.

- ❖ Mathew Arnold told about Keats –“**Keats is enchantingly and abundantly sensuous. He is more sensuous than others because he satisfies not one or two but all the five senses.**”
- ❖ In a letter entitled “**On Axioms and the Surprise of Poetry: Letter to John Taylor**” Keats wrote – “I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity. It should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thought, and appear almost a remembrance.”

Major Works of Keats

❖ Odes of Keats

- Ode to Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode to Autumn
- Ode to Indolence

❖ O Solitude

❖ Endymion (1818)

- “A thing of beauty is joy forever” is the famous line of the poem.

❖ The Eve of St. Agnes

❖ La Bella Dame Sans Merci (ballad)

❖ Lamia

❖ Isabella

❖ Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats (1848)

❖ King Stephan; A Dramatic Fragment (1819)

❖ On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer (Sonnet, total 64 sonnets are written by Keats)

❖ Hyperion and Other Poems (1820)

❖ Bright Star, Would I Were Stead Fast as Thou Art

Endymion: A Poetic Romance (1818)

- ❖ This is the first long poem of Keats.
- ❖ It is based on Greek myth of Endymion, a shepherd loved by the moon goddess, Selene.
- ❖ The poem is in Heroic couplets.
- ❖ Keats called this poem “a test, a trial of his power of imagination and of his inventions”.
- ❖ The poem was dedicated to **Thomas Chatterton**.
- ❖ This poem was attacked by ‘**The Quarterly Review**’ and ‘**Blackwood Magazine**’.

❖ Opening Lines:

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing”.

- ❖ It is dedicated to **Thomas Chatterton**, and it has 4000 lines.
- ❖ Keats is known for his Hellenic spirit.

Negative Capability

- ❖ Keats introduced the concept of “**Negative Capability**” in 1817.
- ❖ He describes it as “When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”
- ❖ He stated that “great poets should have the willingness to remain in doubt or not to resolve conflicts or ambiguities. Some uncertainties were best left open to imagination and that the element of doubt and ambiguity added Romanticism.
- ❖ Keats believed that Shakespeare possessed the quality of negative capability.
- ❖ Negative capability is a concept in which the author/poet has to leave his origin and enter in his work as behaving as a character of it. He has not to think what he is. He has to empathize his characters.

Egotistical Sublime

- ❖ This phrase was used by John Keats in a **letter to Richard Woodhouse** in 1818 to describe his versions of Wordsworth’s distinctive genius like his aloofness, his matter of factness, his austerity and the self-concern.
- ❖ Keats defined his own poetic identity as a “**chameleon Poet**” in a direct contrast to Wordsworth whom he characterizes as monumental and fixed.

Ode to Nightingale

- ❖ It was composed in 1819.
- ❖ He wrote it in Collaboration with **Charles Brown**.
- ❖ Keats called the nightingale as a light-winged nymph of the tree.

Ode to Autumn

- ❖ Keats recorded his love of beauty and love of nature in this poem.
- ❖ Opening lines -
“**Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun**”
- ❖ The poem gives a beautiful description about autumn season where autumn is described as season of “**Mellow Fruitfulness**”.
- ❖ Autumn is a season of ripening of grapes, apples, and Hazelnut etc.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

- ❖ Opening Lines - "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
- ❖ His imagination is fired by the perfect beauty of Greek sculpture.
- ❖ Famous ending lines -

**"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,- that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."**

Eve of St. Agnes

- ❖ His sensuousness is revealed in this poem through picturing of undressing of a woman.
- ❖ Keats thinks that the highest truth can only be realized through the enjoyment of senses.
- ❖ It is a poem of 42 stanzas, written in **Spenserian stanza rhyming abab bcbc c**.
- ❖ The title comes from The Feast of St. Agnes.
- ❖ The Eve falls on 20th January and The Feast Day is 21st January.
- ❖ Like Romeo and Juliet, Madeline and Porphyro in this poem also belongs to hostile families.
- ❖ The poem ends with a note of triumph of lovers.

Hyperion

- ❖ It is an **incomplete epic** poem by Keats.
- ❖ It relates the story of the despair of the Titans and after their fall to the Olympians.
- ❖ He left this poem incomplete because it was criticized of being Miltonic.
- ❖ It exists in 2 versions but both are incomplete.
- ❖ The main theme is the war between Titans and the later Olympian. The Hyperion, the old sun-god is dethroned by Apollo.

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

- ❖ It is a sonnet by **Keats written in 1816**.
- ❖ He was overwhelmed while going through the translation of Chapman's Homer's Iliad.
- ❖ This poem is a **Petrarchan sonnet** divided into an octave and a sestet, with rhyme scheme - **abba, abba cd cd cd**.

The Chameleon Poet - Letter to Richard Woodhouse (1818)

- ❖ Keats wrote a letter to Richard Woodhouse on 27th Oct 1818.
- ❖ Starting line of the letter -
 - "My dear Woodhouse, your letter gave me a great satisfaction."
- ❖ Important Quote

"What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the **chameleon poets**. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no identity."

ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

- ❖ "Ode to a Nightingale" was **composed by John Keats in 1819**, inspired by a nightingale's song.
- ❖ The poem was **written in Hampstead**, possibly in the garden of the Spaniards Inn or under a plum tree at Keats' home.
- ❖ It was first published in **July 1819 in Annals of the Fine Arts** and has since become widely anthologized.
- ❖ The poem represents a personal journey into the **concept of negative capability**, reflecting Keats' philosophical exploration.
- ❖ "Ode to a Nightingale" was **composed in the spring of 1819**
- ❖ The poem's **inspiration came from a nightingale** that built its nest near **Keats' friend Charles Armitage Brown's house**.
- ❖ Keats experienced joy from the nightingale's song, prompting him to write while sitting under a **plum tree**.
- ❖ The **nightingale symbolizes** beauty, immortality, freedom, and eros in literature and mythology.
- ❖ In Greek and Roman myths, the nightingale is connected to **Philomela**, who was transformed into the bird to escape her tragic fate.
- ❖ The poem is **categorized as a Horatian ode**, characterized by its regular structure and lyrical quality.
- ❖ Each stanza of the poem consists of ten lines written in **iambic pentameter**.
- ❖ The rhyme scheme used in "Ode to a Nightingale" **follows an ABAB CDECDE** pattern throughout.
- ❖ Keats' extensive **knowledge of mythology** enriches the poem, giving it an archaic and transcendent quality.
- ❖ The poem expresses **deep personal emotions**, reflecting Keats' own experiences of loss and solitude after his **brother Tom's death**.
- ❖ It is viewed as an **escapist work**, exploring themes of avoiding reality through various means like intoxication and imagination.
- ❖ Ultimately, the ode conveys a yearning for a life filled with beauty, contrasting with the harshness of the real world.

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!
 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

Stanza-1

- ❖ The poet feels **pain in his heart**. His senses become numbed. He feels as though he has drunk **hemlock, a plant which produces poisonous juice**. Or rather, it is as if he has taken some kind of opiate drug just a minute ago. Opium causes the poet to be lost in oblivion. He feels as if he has fallen in **Lethe, a river in Greek mythology**. Its water creates forgetfulness.
- ❖ Now, Keats reveals to us what causes his pain, **numbness and forgetfulness**. There is a **nightingale singing**. The poet says that he is not jealous of the bird's happiness, but he is too happy listening to the song. In his heart he feels a sensation of pain because of excessive joy.
- ❖ The poet compares the nightingale to "**light-winged Dryad**", i.e., a wood-nymph in classical mythology. Like a wood nymph, the nightingale sits on some trees and sings a melodious song in ecstatic joy. There are **beech trees** in that plot and they make countless patches of light and shade. The nightingale sings spontaneously to celebrate the charms of summer.

Stanza 2

- ❖ The poet wishes for a **cup of wine** that has been cooled and **stored for years under the earth**. The wine tastes like flowers. It reminds him of the merry festivities in honour of **Flora, the Goddess of flowers** in Roman mythology. It also reminds him of **dance, song and merry-making**.
- ❖ The poet again seeks a beaker full of wine produced in the **southern country**. Keats here identifies wine with the **water of Hippocrene**.
- ❖ Hippocrene is the name of a **spring on Mount Helicon**, the haunt of Muses. The winged horse Pegasus created it by stamping its hoof into the ground. Drinking from it was supposed to give poetic inspiration.
- ❖ The drink should be **blushing with its redness**. There should be beads on the surface of the wine cup just like the bubbles on the Hippocrene water coming out of the earth. The border of the cup should be glowing **red with the rich colour** of the wine.
- ❖ The poet's wish to drink from the Hippocrene tells us of his longing to become a **great poet**.
- ❖ The poet now reveals his **intention behind the drink**. He says that he **wants to escape the world** under the effect of the drink and vanish into the darkness of the forest with the nightingale.

- ❖ Maybe he wants to **forget his problems**. Or perhaps, he yearns to lose himself completely into the song of the bird.

Stanza 3

- ❖ So, the speaker **dreams of leaving the world** and disappearing from it so as to be by the side of the nightingale where it was singing. Thus, the poet wishes to **fade away into the joyous world of the nightingale**. He wants to **lose his identity**. He would like to **forget the woes and limitations** of this unhappy world.
- ❖ The poet is very much aware that life **full of pain**. The world is full of **'weary' people**. We see **restlessness and anxieties** among people. But the bird knows nothing of these **sufferings of human life**. It is carefree. In this **painful world**, one sits and hears the others groan. The poet wants to be carefree like the bird.
- ❖ The poet continues to depict the **sorrows and sufferings of the world**. Old men here get afflicted with palsy. Young men grow pale. They become thin as ghost. As a result, they **die prematurely**. In this world, any kind of thought leads to sadness. They **can't bring joy or peace**. The despairing thoughts make the eyes heavy with the **weight of sorrow**.
- ❖ In this world **full of sorrow, beauty lose** its charm. A woman's eyes can't retain the bright glow for long. Here, love loses its warmth too soon. Even **newly-born love is temporary**. In a few days the new love cools and proves its futility.
- ❖ The poet yearns to free himself from the **burden of cares and anxieties** and to immerse himself in the world of nature.

Stanza 4

- ❖ In the fourth stanza, Keats asks the nightingale to fly away. He will follow the bird away from the world. But, he won't go there riding the chariot of Bacchus.
- ❖ In Roman mythology, **Bacchus was the god of wine**, usually represented riding in a chariot pulled by **leopards**. So, the reference to Bacchus here indicates to **wine**.
- ❖ The poet gives up the idea of flying up to the bird with the help of wine. It is not potent enough to carry him to the **world of the nightingale**.
- ❖ He will rather do so on the **invisible wings of poetic imagination**.
- ❖ The poet's brain becomes dull. He mistrusts his power of imagination for a moment.
- ❖ He thinks he **can't produce anything creative** any more. His imaginative power also flies away with the bird.
- ❖ The scene now shifts to **the night**. The night is beautiful. The moon is in the sky.
- ❖ The **Queen-moon here suggests Diana**. She is surrounded by star-like fairies.
- ❖ But here where the nightingale flies, there's **no natural light**. **Only heavenly light** falls here.

- ❖ The sweet breeze has blown through the darkness. The darkness of the grove is caused by the numberless trees and their leaves. The zigzag paths are covered with **moss**. It creates a magical place.

Stanza 5

- ❖ It is the **night time**. As the poet hears the song of the nightingale, he is transported in **imagination and forgets his present surroundings**.
- ❖ In the darkness, he **can't see the flowers at his feet**. Even he can't see the plants that produce the pleasant fragrance. But he can **guess the flowers by its smell**.
- ❖ Many a fragrant flower has bloomed amidst the grasses, on the thickets and the trees. He can identify them from their scents.
- ❖ The poet can identify some flowers. These are the **white hawthorn, the eglantine, violets and the first flower of the middle of May, i.e., the musk rose**.
- ❖ The middle of the musk-rose is cup-like. Dew fills it. On the **summer evening**, swarms of buzzing flies crowd in large numbers over the musk roses for honey.
- ❖ So, the poet doesn't find much difference between **spring and summer**. Basically, he has left the world of reality and has gone to the world of nightingale.

Stanza 6

- ❖ Now Keats hears in the darkness the calling of the nightingale. He then says he has often been in love with easeful death. Darkness seems related to the **experience of death**.
- ❖ He is alone in the forest and feels like death is very much near to him. Many times, he invited death in endearing terms to come upon him in **well-thought out verses**. He asked him (death) to take out his breath into the air, i.e., to kill him.
- ❖ There is wealth for him in the thought of death under such circumstances. It is the prime time, the richest moment for him, to die with the song ringing in his ears. Death in the present moment will be a luxury.
- ❖ He wants to **die at sweet midnight**, while the nightingale continues singing with its whole heart and making its song heard from far away (pouring forth thy soul abroad). **The bird is completely lost in pure joy**.
- ❖ After the death of the poet, the bird will be singing still. But the poet would no longer be able to hear it. The song of the nightingale might then be called a **beautiful hymn (high requiem)** to celebrate his death. However, the poet would be lifeless like a sod (turf) then.

Stanza 7

- ❖ The nightingale is not born for death. The voice of the bird is immortal. The bird cannot be immortal as an individual bird. It is the species that is immortal. But Keats makes the individual bird immortal while he makes the individual man mortal.
- ❖ The generations of mortal men are hungry for material benefits. They are ready to trample down what is beautiful. But, even they could not crush the bird. The nightingale with its beautiful song has lived through the ages.
- ❖ The poet is not the first person to hear its song this night. In the old days, the song of the bird comforted all alike – the emperor and the clown.
- ❖ Keats here alludes to the “**Old Testament**” story of **Ruth** to emphasize how the nightingale’s song had been heard in ancient times too.
- ❖ Ruth is the principal character of the “**Book of Ruth**” of the Old Testament. She was a **Moabite woman, the widowed daughter-in-law of Naomi**. After the death of her husband, she migrated with her mother-in-law to Judah. There she gleaned **corn in the field of Boaz, a kinsman of her mother-in-law**. She married Boaz in the end.
- ❖ Keats imagines that while Ruth gleaned corn and her sad heart pined for her home, she heard the song of the nightingale.
- ❖ The same song must have reached the ears of a captive lady. It regaled her soul as she stood at the open window (casements) of an enchanted castle. The window is opened out onto the sea. There is an air of danger – the sea is perilous. The place is a kind of fantasy land. The fairyland belongs to the remote past (forlorn).

Stanza 8

- ❖ The word “**forlorn**” here in the last stanza of the poem reminds Keats of his own miseries and desolate state. Keats has used the word in the previous stanza in its archaic sense of “**utterly lost**”. But the meaning of “forlorn” is definitely shifted, as the poet repeats the word. It describes the poet’s own state. He comes back to reality. All of a sudden, the very word recalls him from the world of fancy to the actual world.
- ❖ The poet bids **farewell (Adieu)** to the bird. He now realises that though fancy is known to be a mischievous fairy, she is unable to deceive him in the manner she usually does. Fancy so long held the poet spell-bound and transported him into a region of unearthly beauty and happiness.
- ❖ The poet now realizes that fancy can create a world of beauty only for a brief span of time. Fancy or imagination is, after all, temporary.
- ❖ The poet again bids good bye to the bird. The bird is flying away. As Keats’ mood turns to regret, the song appears sad (plaintive). The nightingale’s song recedes, and it becomes harder to hear as the bird flies from the nearby meadows,

across a stream, up a hill and into the next valley. He can't hear it now.

- ❖ It has been a quick anti-climax from the fanciful world where we the readers along with the poet were moments ago.
- ❖ These are the concluding lines of the poem. The poet was deeply enthralled by the song of the nightingale. When the bird leaves, he returns to reality. The poet is in a dilemma. He fails to understand his state at his present. The illusion produced by the song has vanished. The poet now asks himself whether the song of the nightingale was real and he was listening to it or whether he had been day-dreaming. He wonders if he is awake or asleep.

