

"Ode to a Nightingale" was written by the Romantic poet John Keats in the spring of 1819. At 80 lines, it is the longest of Keats's odes (which include poems like "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode on Melancholy"). The poem focuses on a speaker standing in a dark forest, listening to the beguiling and beautiful song of the nightingale bird. This provokes a deep and meandering meditation by the speaker on time, death, beauty, nature, and human suffering (something the speaker would very much like to escape!). At times, the speaker finds comfort in the nightingale's song and at one

comfort in the nightingale's song and at one point even believes that poetry will bring the speaker metaphorically closer to the nightingale. By the end of the poem, however, the speaker seems to be an isolated figure—the nightingale flies away, and the speaker unsure of whether the whole experience has been "a vision" or a "waking dream."

- You can read the full text of "Ode to a Nightingale" [here](#).

“Ode to a Nightingale” 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.