

1. *Beauty and transience are the recurrent themes in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". Discuss*

"The excellence of every Art is in its intensity, capable of making all disagreeable evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth."

This letter of Keats, written to his brother in December 1817, is an embryonic presentation of "Beauty" and its relation to "Truth" --- a concept so gloriously illustrated through his poems, especially the odes.

Keats' conception of Beauty inspired Baudelaire's comment in "*L'Art Romantique*":

"The beauty is an element, which is eternal, invariable and thus excessively difficult to determine..."

Keats, the great --- the apostle of beauty though "submitted himself steadily, persistently [and] unflinchingly to life", yet he remains in Calvin's phrase "someone whose mind is naturally inept for dogma."

The nightingale and urn are symbols of immortality, a symbol of continuity of nature and art respectively. In the "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats contrasts the birds' immortality with the mortality of human beings as he states "Here where men sit and hear each other groan, where Palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, where youth grows pale, and specter-thin, and dies,"(III, 25) but the nightingale, entertaining generations after generations has become an immortal species, so much so that the sound that poet has heard was heard in ancient days by emperor and clown, by Ruth (a virtuous Moabite widow who according to Old Testament Book of Ruth, left her own country to accompany her mother-in-law Naomi, back to Naomi's native land), where she was amidst the corn, remembering her home town; and also by fairies.

The inner pain and grief engulfing the poet is revealed in a very subtle manner in both the odes of discussion. Even when the speaker is in the imaginative world with the nightingale, he is thinking of death in "embalmed darkness." Gradually the feeling of being embalmed becomes a wish for death. He also realizes that death means he could no longer hear the bird song and will be non-existent. Suddenly the beautiful bird song seems to him more like "requiem"(VI, 60), a song of death. As the reality is painful, poet realizes that, "fancy" (VIII, 73), has cheated him. The bird is not a symbol anymore but an actual bird that poet had heard in the beginning. The nightingale flies away and its song seems a "plaintive anthem"(VIII, 75), very faint. Its voice is "buried deep" (VIII, 77) refers to its physical distance. As the music goes from his life, the poet wonders whether his end is close

"Ode to a Nightingale" is full of lively oscillations in tone and mood. The poet is pulled in conflicting direction: now towards death, now towards life; now towards imaginative permanence of Beauty and now towards mutable natures of all beautiful things. In the seventh stanza, the Nightingale that has sung so rapturously and exquisitely down the ages seems to offer a promise of immortality. The beauty of the song seemed to be eternal. Yet in the eighth stanza as skepticism reasserts itself, the bird flies away, dwindling from timelessness to the temporal:

"Fled is that---Do I wake or sleep?"

Keats has expressed his doctrine of Beauty and its relation to Truth in his one of his most famous Ode--- "Ode on a Grecian Urn". This Ode celebrates the idea expressed above. Here Keats finds beauty in the reality, represented by the Urn. Human beings are imprisoned in the world of flux, evanescence, transition and illusion,

where vibrant and dynamic, therefore real. The pictures depicted on the Urn are of absolute energy in repose. It gives the message of the equation of Beauty and when he feels this joy, he realizes a new aspect of beauty, which is Truth. In this identity of Beauty and Truth, lies the secret harmony of this universe. Keats realizes this congruency, when he says emphatically:

“ ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ ---- that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

According to Keats, Beauty transcends individual, time and space. The inexorable march of time will not affect Beauty. Beauty to Keats is like the dome of Byzantium of Yeats, unaffected by the forces of mutability. Keats arrives at the eternal truth through his ‘negative capability’. In this Ode, Keats arrests the fleeting moments in external postures. Human life and its ecstasy may be terse, but art enshrines them with an ideal Beauty that remains eternal.