

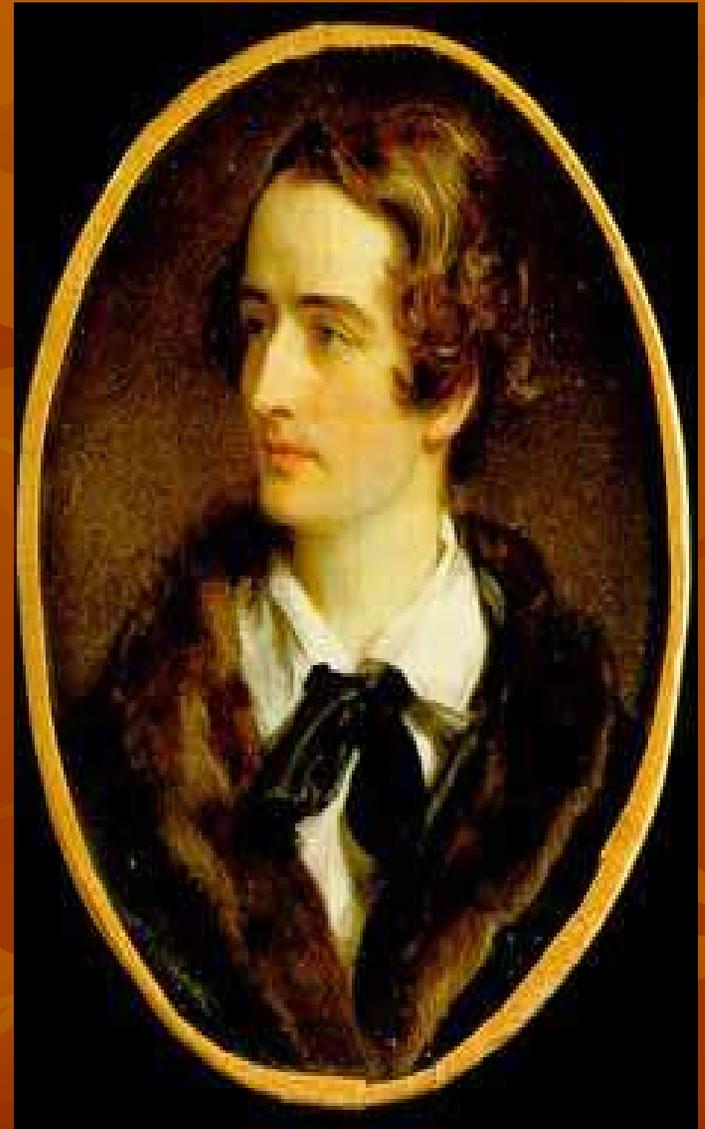
**ODE TO
A NIGHTINGALE**



JOHN KEATS

About the Author

- **John Keat** (31 October 1795 – 23 February 1821) was an English Romantic poet. He was one of the main figures of the second generation of Romantic poets along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, despite his work only having been in publication for four years before his death. The poetry of Keats is characterised by sensual imagery, most notably in the series of odes.



About the Poem

- "Ode to a Nightingale" is a poem by John Keats written in May 1819 in either the garden of the Spaniards Inn, Hampstead, London, or, according to Keats' friend Charles Armitage Brown, under a plum tree in the garden of Keats House, also in Hampstead. According to Brown, a nightingale had built its nest near his home in the spring of 1819. Inspired by the bird's song, Keats composed the poem in one day. It soon became one of his 1819 odes and was first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts* the following July. "Ode to a Nightingale" is a personal poem that describes Keats's journey into the state of Negative Capability. The tone of the poem rejects the optimistic pursuit of pleasure found within Keats's earlier poems and explores the themes of nature, transience and mortality, the latter being particularly personal to Keats.

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- The nightingale described within the poem experiences a type of death but does not actually die. Instead, the songbird is capable of living through its song, which is a fate that humans cannot expect. The poem ends with an acceptance that pleasure cannot last and that death is an inevitable part of life. In the poem, Keats imagines the loss of the physical world and sees himself dead—as a "sod" over which the nightingale sings. The contrast between the immortal nightingale and mortal man, sitting in his garden, is made all the more acute by an effort of the imagination. The presence of weather is noticeable in the poem, as spring came early in 1819, bringing nightingales all over the heath.

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- When it came to vowel forms, Keats incorporated a pattern of alternating historically "short" and "long" vowel sounds in his ode. In particular, line 18 ("And purple-stained mouth") has the historical pattern of "short" followed by "long" followed by "short" and followed by "long". This alteration is continued in longer lines, including line 31 ("Away! away! for I will fly to thee") which contains five pairs of alternations
- However, other lines, such as line 3 ("Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains") rely on a pattern of five "short" vowels followed by "long" and "short" vowel pairings until they end with a "long" vowel. These are not the only combination patterns present, and there are patterns of two "short" vowels followed by a "long" vowel in other lines, including 12, 22, and 59, which are repeated twice and then followed up with two sets of "short" and then "long" vowel pairs.

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- "Ode to a Nightingale" describes a series of conflicts between reality and the Romantic ideal of uniting with nature. In the words of Richard Fogle, "The principal stress of the poem is a struggle between ideal and actual: inclusive terms which, however, contain more particular antitheses of pleasure and pain, of imagination and common sense reason, of fullness and privation, of permanence and change, of nature and the human, of art and life, freedom and bondage, waking and dream." Of course, the nightingale's song is the dominant image and dominant "voice" within the ode. The nightingale is also the object of empathy and praise within the poem. However, the nightingale and the discussion of the nightingale is not simply about the bird or the song, but about human experience in general. This is not to say that the song is a simple metaphor, but it is a complex image that is formed through the interaction of the conflict voices of praise and questioning.

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- The poem begins suddenly, marked by use of heavy sounding syllables ("My heart aches" line 1), as it introduces the song of a hidden bird. Immediately, the narrator is overcome with such a feeling that he believes he has either been poisoned or is influenced by a drug. It is soon revealed that the source of this feeling is a nightingale's song. The narrator empathises with it and finds it has paralyzed his mind.
- The world of imagination is not a place that a man could ever live in. This knowledge causes the narrator to become disheartened as the imaginary world is destroyed. The narrator cannot have the imaginary land. He is not just separate from the bird, but from poetry and imagination in general. The narrator mourns in the final lines of the poem as he realizes that he has been abandoned by his art.

