

Context of the odes

In his short life, John Keats wrote some of the most beautiful and enduring poems in the English language. Among his greatest achievements is his sequence of six lyric odes, written between March and September 1819--astonishingly, when Keats was only twenty-four years old. Keats's poetic achievement is made all the more miraculous by the age at which it ended: He died barely a year after finishing the ode "To Autumn," in February 1821.

Keats was born in 1795 to a lower-middle-class family in London. When he was still young, he lost both his parents. His mother succumbed to tuberculosis, the disease that eventually killed Keats himself. When he was fifteen, Keats entered into a medical apprenticeship, and eventually he went to medical school. But by the time he turned twenty, he abandoned his medical training to devote himself wholly to poetry. He published his first book of poems in 1817; they drew savage critical attacks from an influential magazine, and his second book attracted comparatively little notice when it appeared the next year. Keats's brother Tom died of tuberculosis in December 1818, and Keats moved in with a friend in Hampstead.

In Hampstead, he fell in love with a young girl named Fanny Brawne. During this time, Keats began to experience the extraordinary creative inspiration that enabled him to write, at a frantic rate, all his best poems in the time before he died. His health and his finances declined sharply, and he set off for Italy in the summer of 1820, hoping the warmer climate might restore his health. He never returned home. His death brought to an untimely end one of the most extraordinary poetic careers of the nineteenth century--indeed, one of the most extraordinary poetic careers of all time. Keats never achieved widespread recognition for his work in his own life (his bitter request for his tombstone: "Here lies one whose name was writ on water"), but he was sustained by a deep inner confidence in his own ability. Shortly before his death, he remarked that he believed he would be among "the English poets" when he had died.

Keats was one of the most important figures of early nineteenth-century Romanticism, a movement that espoused the sanctity of emotion and imagination, and privileged the beauty of the natural world. Many of the ideas and themes evident in Keats's great odes are quintessentially Romantic concerns: the beauty of nature, the relation between imagination and creativity, the response of the passions to beauty and suffering, and the transience of human life in time. The sumptuous sensory language in which the odes are written, their idealistic concern for beauty and truth, and their expressive agony in the face of death are all Romantic preoccupations--though at the same time, they are all uniquely Keats's.

Taken together, the odes do not exactly tell a story--there is no unifying "plot" and no recurring characters--and there is little evidence that Keats intended them to stand together as a single work of art. Nevertheless, the extraordinary number of suggestive interrelations between them is impossible to ignore. The odes explore and develop the same themes, partake of many of the same approaches and images, and, ordered in a certain way, exhibit an unmistakable psychological development. This is not to say that the poems do not stand on their own--they do, magnificently; one of the greatest felicities of the sequence is that it can be entered at any point, viewed wholly or partially from any perspective, and still prove moving and rewarding to read. There has been a great deal of critical debate over how to treat the voices that speak the poems--are they meant to be read as though a single person speaks them all, or did Keats invent a different persona for each ode?

There is no right answer to the question, but it is possible that the poems are all wrong. The odes, in fact, work if each of the odes is

unmistakably Keats's own. Of course, the poems are not explicitly autobiographical (it is unlikely that all the events really happened to Keats), but given their sincerity and their shared frame of thematic reference, there is no reason to think that they do not come from the same part of Keats's mind--that is to say, that they are not all told by the same part of Keats's reflected self. In that sense, there is no harm in treating the odes a sequence of utterances told in the same voice. The psychological progress from "Ode on Indolence" to "To Autumn" is intimately personal, and a great deal of that intimacy is lost if one begins to imagine that the odes are spoken by a sequence of fictional characters. When you think of "the speaker" of these poems, think of Keats as he would have imagined himself while writing them. As you trace the speaker's trajectory from the numb drowsiness of "Indolence" to the quiet wisdom of "Autumn," try to hear the voice develop and change under the guidance of Keats's extraordinary language.

This ode was written in May 1819 and first published in the *Annals of the Fine Arts* in July 1819. Interestingly, in both the original draft and in its first publication, it is titled 'Ode to the Nightingale'. The title was altered by Keats's publishers. Twenty years after the poet's death, Joseph Severn painted the famous portrait 'Keats listening to a nightingale on Hampstead Heath'.

Critics generally agree that *Nightingale* was the second of the five 'great odes' of 1819 and its themes are reflected in its 'twin' ode, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Keats's friend and roommate, Charles Brown, described the composition of this beautiful work as follows:

'In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found these scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale. The writing was not well legible; and it was difficult to arrange the stanzas on so many scraps. With his assistance I succeeded, and this was his 'Ode to a Nightingale', a poem which has been the delight of everyone.'

Brown's account was dismissed as 'pure delusion' by Charles Wentworth Dilke, the co-owner of Wentworth Place who visited Brown and Keats regularly. After reading the above account in Milnes's 1848 biography of Keats, Dilke noted in the margin, 'We do not usually thrust waste paper behind books'.

It should be noted that Brown wrote his account almost twenty years after the event. Some critics believe he may have confused the compositions of 'Ode on Indolence' and 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The original manuscript of 'Indolence' is lost and the order of its stanzas remains doubtful (note Brown's memory of arranging stanzas.)

The manuscript is actually on two sheets of paper, not 'four or five' as Brown recalled, and the stanzas are in relative order. But the work was written hastily on scrap paper. It is clear that Keats did not anticipate writing such a lengthy poem when he took just two sheets of paper into the garden, – and he did not dare interrupt his writing to fetch more later.