

LITERATURE

Keats

Like much of the poetry of Keats, these three poems explore life's contrasts of love and loss, happiness and sorrow, permanence and impermanence. In true Romantic style, the author celebrates life's pleasures and experiences – as embodied by the Belle Dame, the Nightingale and the “beaker full”. But these pleasures, tainted by mortality, must by their impermanence breed sorrow in the poet, as evidenced by the tone of mortal anguish common to “Ode to a Nightingale”, “When I have fears” and “La Belle Dame sans Merci”. But while certainly in touch with sorrow and mortality, these works are yet alive with vibrance, vivid sensuality and a depth of emotion – bridged from the mind of Keats to the reader through the use of rich and evocative language and imagery.

The first poem, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, explores the fleeting nature of love and life, plotting the inevitability of loss and death. In the first line, the knight finds himself enthralled in love, and for the briefest moment escapes to its “elfin grot” – a magical cave offering shelter from the outside world. But even in the midst of “wild” romance and “kisses” are hints of life's true sorrow, for the knight's lover has already “wept, and sigh'd full sore”. But with love's power to subjugate the rational mind, the knight is “lulled... asleep”, blind to these omens of soon-departure – blinded by what Keats elsewhere describes as “the faery power/Of unreflecting love”. In his dreams, he envisages all those many others cheated by love's transience, as he is soon to be. Both kings, princes and warriors – people of all stations of life – succumb to the “death-pale” that is the fate of all mankind. Too soon, life ends. Too soon, love disappears. And all those who were love's “thrall” – slaves of romance and pleasure – are left “starved” and “alone”, for its sustenance flees them with old age, leaving only a “horrid warning” of its fleeting and merciless (“sans Merci”) nature for them to pass on the next generation as they “palely loiter”, awaiting their turn to depart this ephemeral world. Thus, the knight is left steeped in sorrow, with the realisation of life's transience and grief – the same mood in which we find the poet of *Ode to a Nightingale*.

This second poem elaborates on the theme of earthly sorrow by contrasting it with the immortal song of the nightingale, which inspires the poet to attempt to escape the anguish of mortality. When reading this ode, the image of an invalid medicated to escape their pain springs to mind, for the poet's “heart aches” and the “drowsy numbness” of medication – “some dull opiate” – is affecting his “sense”. Perhaps Keats was re-living the experience of his brother Tom, who had died only a few months prior from consumption. Perhaps this young medical student already foresaw his own similar death. Regardless, the downhearted persona is gripped with “numbness” and has “sunk” towards mental vacuity, as represented by “Lethe”, the river of forgetfulness. In this state of despairing oblivion, the poet is interrupted by the “too happy” song of the nightingale, that “light-winged Dryad of the trees”. This song is overly joyous compared to the “weariness”, “fever” and “fret” of mortal life, and stirs the poet to grasp for a similar means to unmindful bliss. In the midst of his “pains” and heart ache, the poet longs to attain the “happy lot” and “full-throated ease” of this simple creature through intoxication, exclaiming: “O for a draught of vintage!”.

The almost tangible image of “beaded bubbles winking at the brim”, made all the more vibrant through alliteration, brings alive the desirability of this escape. He wishes to “drink, and leave the world unseen” – to “fade away” after the nightingale, leaving behind the sorrows of mortal life. Once again, the image of a hospital – a symbol of sorrow and mortal pain with which Keats was certainly familiar – is suggested by the phrase “Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.” Just like the untimely death of his younger brother (and the similar fate of the knight), Keats is pained by the fact that “youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies”. Thus, his only desire is to “fade far away” and “quite forget” the “sorrow” and “leaden-eyed despairs” of life, and immerse himself in a state of “ease” and happiness similar to the nightingale.

Just as the love of the knight soon “wither’d”, *Ode to a Nightingale* concludes that the pleasures of “lustrous” beauty and “new Love” fail to last “beyond tomorrow”. This point is further expounded by *When I have fears*. Here, love is described as the “fair creature of an hour” – a thing as short-lived as life itself.” No matter whether escape is sought in love, wine or the “teeming brain” of creativity, the author resigns himself to the futility of attempting to escape life’s sorrows and evanescence. Ultimately, the knight is left “alone”, the poet is left straining after an unattainable perfection in his world “full of sorrow”, and Keats comes to the realisation that “Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.”

The repeated allusions to death and impermanence throughout these three poems reflect Keats’ own constant reminders of mortality. They imply a disenchantment with life born of hardship, sorrow and disappointment. These poems share an inclination towards escaping reality and finding solace in ‘wine’, the ‘wings of poesy’ and even death, as a result of life’s fleeting pleasures and inevitable pain. Life, beauty and love are celebrated, only to be revealed as fleeting and out of reach. In a world of heartache and ‘weariness’, the poet seeks stability and constancy in Nature, but even the natural world is proven to be without solace. Just as the poet asks, ‘Where are the songs of Spring?’, so Love and Beauty soon fade and are forgotten, for such is the nature of life. To the poet’s regret, the truth must be accepted – nothing is constant.