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ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

AN ANALYSIS OF JOHN KEATS' POEM

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Introduction

A friend of John Keats once wrote of John's inspiration for this beautiful poem, "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 those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale."

Rudyard Kipling said of lines 69 and 70 of this poem by Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*, and of three lines from Samuel Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* some thing truly amazing and I quote:

In all the millions permitted there are no more than five—five little lines—of which one can say, "These are the magic. These are the vision. The rest is only Poetry."

This poem, I must say, is magical in every sense of the word. Keats would not live a long life. I wish he did, he was just beginning to write odes, this being his most famous, and his form is one I sometimes use in my own poetry. You have to listen to this poem being read to understand what Kipling meant when he said it was magical. *Kubla Khan* is a poem I recently discovered after seeking inspiration for a poem I was writing on the topic of dreams, it too is magical as well I must say. What I find fascinating is Keats' intricate and brilliant use of metaphors throughout this poem. There are so many beautifully hidden metaphoric treasures to be found in each line. Hiding the meaning of one's work through metaphor is a skill only the best poets can do, and Keats was indeed a poetic genius.

I will analyze each of Keats' Stanzas and give my own personal opinion as a poet of what Keats was thinking when he wrote this beautiful poem, then show you the intricate details of his meter as best I can. If there are any variations from iambic meter, I will note them all. After writing over 200 poems, I have become sensitive to feeling poetic meter in others' poems quite easily, though I may err as well. Each English speaker has a different way of stressing words due to varying accents. Being a Californian, I will definitely pronounce words a bit differently than one from the eastern part of the United States, and a lot differently than those in England. I admit, my one weakness as a poet is that I sometimes find pyrrhic and spondaic feet. They are difficult to distinguish from iambs when the contrast between the two stresses is minor. Prosodists tend to believe such feet don't exist in the English language because no two stresses are ever equally strong. Perhaps, and I can certainly understand their argument, since syllable *length*, not stress, was the basis of Greek and Roman poetry and song.

Also, like Keats, I have always loved to experiment with meter, not staying with strict iambs. Shakespeare also varied his meter at times in his sonnets, using at least an initial trochee here and there. Since they both are two-syllable stresses, they can be used to add minor variety to a line without adding extra syllable count to poems that require a strict syllable count, as in the Shakespearean Sonnet. Even the bard varied his syllable count, due to his tendency to use feminine endings, thus instead of ten syllables some of his lines had eleven.

Meter

Iambic Pentameter

Keats wrote this poem almost entirely in iambic pentameter, save for the 8th line of each stanza, which is written in iambic trimeter. Though this poem is iambic in nature, it does have plenty of well-placed anapests, trochees, and spondees to add some pleasant variety to this somewhat lengthy piece of eighty lines. Variations in meter can help break the otherwise expected iambic beat. A long piece, especially an epic poem, can become monotonous with the strictly iambic meter. Though shorter forms, such as a Shakespearean sonnet, should have very few variations, as too many variations in a shorter work can botch the flow of the meter and confound the reader.

A word of advice for those just learning meter: aforesaid, very weak syllables are now so weak as to not be heard and blend into another syllable, counting as one syllable: like in the word *famed* in line 74, pronounced FĀMD. Yet Keats spelt the word as fam'd, this removal of a letter is called elision, for in Early Modern English, two syllables were often heard in those now having only one. If one were to show the reader an intent of the older pronunciation, it would be written as famèd, pronounced FĀM-ehd. Doing otherwise may throw off the meter for most readers, causing your poem to become very hard on the ear, not at all melodic, unless, in the rare case, the reader's native accent, as well as the poet's, does account for this rare enunciation. Also, do treat each foot as a separate entity; stresses can vary quite a bit from foot to foot. For example, in the phrase 'beechen green':

| of BEE | -chen GREEN

Here, the syllable 'bee' is weaker than the syllable 'chen, ' yet since the syllables are split into different feet, they should be treated as living in another world altogether, the vertical bar or vertical slash symbol ¹ (|) separates these two worlds.

Keats uses a variety of iambic substitutions throughout half of this poem. The variations include many anapests and spondees. There are also plenty of trochees, often at the start of his lines. Also, he does use the occasional *pyrrhic* foot, usually placing them next to *spondees* to great effect. Such use of varied meter can be found throughout all his 1819 odes, but more so in his earlier works. Keats had a unique style, dream-like, very melodic, and at times deviated from strict iambic verse to great effect. He was adept at the use of rich language, profound imagery, and creative meter.

Keats was known for the *Keatsian spondee* or the unusual placement of spondees on the fifth foot. Most poets place spondees at the beginning of the line or aptly, as Keats often did, in the middle: a mid-line pause harkening back to long-ago days of Anglo-Saxon verse, in which each line had a medial caesura. Spondees tend to slow down one's speech when reading a line of poetry, hence acting as a natural caesura. In his poem *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, Keats used this technique to great effect: one example is his placement of a terminal spondee just after a pyrrhic foot, thus creating a minor ionic or double iamb. The fast beat harmonizes well with its paired slow beat, creating a lively lyrical melody, as seen here in line 76:

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the/ still stream,/

In 'Ode to a Nightingale', the striking effect of both a penultimate and ultimate spondee can be found on the fifth line of stanza three, the phrase 'sad, last gray hairs' slowing down the tempo considerably:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last /gray háirs,/

Feet

Iambic pentameter for all lines save for the trimeter 8th: 5-5-5-5-5-5-3-5-5

Scansion of Keats' Meter in *Ode to a Nightingale*

1st Stanza

my **HEART** | **ACHES**, and | a **DROW** | sy **NUMB** | ness **PAINS**
my **SENSE**, | as **THOUGH** | of **HEM** | lock **I** | had **DRUNK**,
or **EMP** | tied **SOME** | dull **OP** | i-ate **TO** | the **DRAINS**
one **MIN** | ute **PAST**, | and **LE** | -the-**WARDS** | had **SUNK**:
'tis **NOT** | through **EN** | vy **OF** | thy **HAP** | py **LOT**,
but **BE** | ing **TOO** | **HAP** | py **IN** | thine **HAP** | pi-**NESS**,—
that **THOU**, | **LIGHT-WING** | èd **DRY** | ad **OF** | the **TREES**
in **SOME** | me-**LOD** | i-ous **PLOT**
of **BEE** | chen **GREEN**, | and **SHAD** | ows **NUMB** | er-**LESS**,
SING-est | of **SUM** | mer in | **FULL-THROUT** | -ed **EASE**.

- Line 1: (pentameter) 1 iamb, 1 trochee, 3 iambs
- Line 2: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 3: (pentameter) 3 iambs, 1 anapest, 1 iamb
- Line 4: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 5: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 6: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 7: (pentameter) 1 iamb, 1 spondee, 3 iambs
- Line 8: (trimeter) 2 iambs, 1 anapest
- Line 9: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 10: (pentameter) trochee, iamb, pyrrhic, spondee, iamb

2nd Stanza

O, for | a **DRAUGHT** | of **VINT** | age! **THAT** | hath **BEEN**
COOL'D a | **LONG AGE** | in the | **DEEP-DELV** | èd **EARTH**,
TAST-ing | of **FLO** | ra **AND** | the **COUN** | try **GREEN**,
DANCE, and | **PROV-en** | çal **SONG**, | and **SUN** | **BURNT MIRTH!**
o **FOR** | a **BEAK** | -er **FULL** | of the | **WARM SOUTH**,
FULL of | the **TRUE**, | the **BLUSH** | -ful **HIP** | po-**CRENE**,
with **BEAD** | -ed **BUB** | bles **WINK** | ing **AT** | the **BRIM**,
and **PUR** | ple-**STAIN** | -èd **MOUTH**;
that **I** | might **DRINK**, | and **LEAVE** | the **WORLD** | un-**SEEN**,
and **WITH** | thee **FADE** | a-**WAY** | in-**TO** | the **FOR** | -est **DIM**:

- Line 1: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 4 iambs
- Line 2: (pentameter) trochee, spondee, pyrrhic, spondee, iamb
- Line 3: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 4 iambs
- Line 4: (pentameter) 2 trochees, 2 iambs, 1 spondee
- Line 5: (pentameter) 3 iambs, 1 pyrrhic, 1 spondee
- Line 6: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 4 iambs
- Line 7: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 8: (trimeter) 3 iambs
- Line 9: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 10: (pentameter) 5 iambs

3rd Stanza

FADE FAR | a-**WAY**, | dis-**SOLVE**, | and **QUITE** | for-**GET**
 what **THOU** | a-**MONG** | the **LEAVES** | hast **NEV** | -er **KNOWN**,
 the **WEAR** | -i-**NESS**, | the **FEV** | -er, **AND** | the **FRET**
HERE, where | **MEN SIT** | and **HEAR** | each **OTH** | -er **GROAN**;
 where **PAL** | -sy **SHAKES** | a **FEW**, | **SAD, LAST** | **GRAY HAIRS**,
 where **YOUTH** | **GROWS PALE**, | and **SPEC** | tre-**THIN**, | and **DIES**;
 where **BUT** | to **THINK** | is to | be **FULL** | of **SOR-row**
 and **LED** | -en-**EYED** | de-**SPAIRS**,
 where **BEAU** | -ty **CAN** | -not **KEEP** | her **LUST** | -rous **EYES**,
 or **NEW** | love **PINE** | at **THEM** | be-**YOND** | to-**MOR-row**.

- Line 1: (pentameter) 1 spondee, 4 iambs
- Line 2: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 3: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 4: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 1 spondee, 3 iambs
- Line 5: (pentameter) 3 iambs, 2 spondees
- Line 6: (pentameter) 1 iamb, 1 spondee, 3 iambs
- Line 7: (pentameter) 2 iambs, pyrrhic, iamb, amphibrach
- Line 8: (trimeter) 3 iambs
- Line 9: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 10: (pentameter) 4 iambs, 1 amphibrach

4th Stanza

a**WAY**! | a**WAY**! | for **I** | will **FLY** | to **THEE**,
 not **CHAR** | -i-**OT** | -ed by **BAC** | -chus **AND** | his **PARDS**,
 but **ON** | the **VIEW** | -less **WINGS** | of **PO** | -e-**SY**,
THOUGH the | **DULL BRAIN** | per-**PLEX** | -es **AND** | re-**TARDS**:
 al-**REA** | -dy **WITH** | thee! **TEND** | -er **IS** | the **NIGHT**,
 and **HAP** | -ly the | **QUEEN-MOON** | is **ON** | her **THRONE**,
CLUS-ter'd | a-**ROUND** | by **ALL** | her **STAR** | -ry **FAYS**;
 but **HERE** | there **IS** | no **LIGHT**,
 save **WHAT** | from **HEAV** | -en is **WITH** | the **BREEZ** | -es **BLOWN**
 through **VER** | -der-ous **GLOOMS** | and **WIND** | ing **MOS** | sy **WAYS**.

- Line 1: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 2: (pentameter) 2 iambs, 1 anapest, 2 iambs
- Line 3: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 4: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 1 spondee, 3 iambs
- Line 5: (pentameter) 5 iambs

- Line 6: (pentameter) 1 iamb, 1 pyrrhic, 1 spondee, 2 iambs
- Line 7: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 4 iambs
- Line 8: (trimeter) 3 iambs
- Line 9: (pentameter) 2 iambs, 1 anapest, 2 iambs
- Line 10: (pentameter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest, 3 iambs

5th Stanza

i **CAN** | not **SEE** | what **FLOW**|-ers are **AT** | my **FEET**,
 nor **WHAT** | soft **IN** | -cense **HANGS** | up-**ON** | the **BOUGHS**,
 but, **IN** | em-**BALM** | -éd **DARK** | -ness, **GUESS** | each **SWEET**
 where-**WITH** | the **SEAS** | -on-a | -ble **MONTH** | en-**DOWS**
 the **GRASS**, | the **THICK** | -et, **AND** | the **FRUIT** | -tree **WILD**;
WHITE HAW | **THORN**, and | the **PAST** | -or-al **EG** | -lan-**TINE**;
 fast **FAD** | ing **VI** | -o-lets **COV** | -er'd **UP** | in **LEAVES**;
 and **MID** | -May's **ELD** | est **CHILD**,
 the **COM** | ing **MUSK** | -rose, **FULL** | of **DEW** | -y **WINE**,
 the **MUR** | -mur-ous **HAUNT** | of **FLIES** | on **SUM** | mer **EVES**.

- Line 1: (pentameter) 3 iambs, 1 anapest, 1 iamb
- Line 2: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 3: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 4: (pentameter) 2 iambs, 1 pyrrhic, 2 iambs
- Line 5: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 6: (pentameter) spondee, trochee, iamb, anapest, iamb
- Line 7: (pentameter) 2 iambs, 1 anapest, 2 iambs
- Line 8: (trimeter) 3 iambs
- Line 9: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 10: (pentameter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest, 3 iambs

6th Stanza

DARK-ling | i **LIST** | en; **AND**, | for **MA** | -ny a **TIME**
 i **HAVE** | been **HALF** | in **LOVE** | with **EASE** | ful **DEATH**,
CALL'D him | **SOFT NAMES** | in **MAN** | -y a **MUS** | -éd **RHYME**,
 to **TAKE** | in-**TO** | the **AIR** | my **QUI** | -et **BREATH**;
 now **MORE** | than **EV** | -er **SEEMS** | it **RICH** | to **DIE**,²
 to **CEASE** | up-**ON** | the **MID** | -**NIGHT** with | no **PAIN**,
 while **THOU** | art **POUR** | -ing **FORTH** | thy **SOUL** | a-**BROAD**
 in **SUCH** | an **EC** | -sta-**SY**!²
 still **WOULDST** | thou **SING**, | and **I** | have **EARS** | in **VAIN**—
 to **THY** | high **REQ** | -ui-**EM** | be-**COME** | a **SOD**.

- Line 1: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 3 iambs, 1 anapest
- Line 2: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 3: (pentameter) trochee, spondee, iamb, anapest, iamb
- Line 4: (pentameter) 5 iambs,
- Line 5: (pentameter) 3 iambs, 1 spondee, 1 iamb
- Line 6: (pentameter) 3 iambs, 1 trochee, 1 iamb
- Line 7: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 8: (trimeter) 3 iambs
- Line 9: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 10: (pentameter) 5 iambs

7th Stanza

thou **WAST** | not **BORN** | for **DEATH**, | im-**MORT** | -al **BIRD**!
 No **HUN** | -gry **GEN** | -er-**A** | -tions **TREAD** | thee **DOWN**;
 the **VOICE** | i **HEAR** | this **PASS** | -ing **NIGHT** | was **HEARD**
 in **AN** | -cient **DAYS** | by **EMP** | -cr-**OR** | and **CLOWN**:
 per-**HAPS** | the **SELF** | -**SAME SONG** | that **FOUND** | a **PATH**
THROUGH the | **SAD HEART** | of **RUTH**, | when, **SICK** for **HOME**,
 she **STOOD** | in **TEARS** | a-**MID** | the **A** | -li-en **CORN**;
 the **SAME** | that **OFT** | -**TIMES HATH**
CHARM'D MAG | -ic **CASE** | -ments, **OP** | -en-ing **ON** | the **FOAM**
 of **PER** | -il-ous **SEAS**, | in **FAER** | -y **LANDS** | for-**LORN**.

- Line 1: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 2: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 3: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 4: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 5: (pentameter) 2 iambs, 1 spondee, 2 iambs
- Line 6: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 1 spondee, 3 iambs
- Line 7: (pentameter) 4 iambs, 1 anapest
- Line 8: (trimeter) 2 iambs, 1 spondee
- Line 9: (pentameter) 1 spondee, 2 iambs, 1 anapest, 1 iamb
- Line 10: (pentameter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest, 3 iambs

8th Stanza

for-**LORN**! | the **VE** | -ry **WORD** | is **LIKE** | a **BELL**
 to **TOLL** | me **BACK** | from **THEE** | to my | **SOLE SELF**!
 a-**DIEU**! | the **FAN** | -cy **CAN** | -not **CHEAT** | so **WELL**
 as **SHE** | is **FAM'D** | to **DO**, | de-**CEIV** | -ing **ELF**.

a-DIEU! | a-DIEU! | thy PLAIN | -tive ANTH | -em FADES
 PAST the | near MEAD | -ows, OV | -er the | STILL STREAM,
 UP the | HILL-side; | and NOW | 'tis BUR | -ied DEEP
 in the | NEXT VALL | -ey-GLADES:
 WAS it | a VIS | -ion, OR | a WAK | -ing DREAM?
 FLED is | that MUS | -ic:—DO | I WAKE | or SLEEP?

- Line 1: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 2: (pentameter) 3 iambs, 1 pyrrhic, 1 spondee
- Line 3: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 4: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 5: (pentameter) 5 iambs
- Line 6: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 2 iambs, 1 pyrrhic, 1 spondee
- Line 7: (pentameter) 2 trochees, 3 iambs
- Line 8: (trimeter) 1 pyrrhic, 1 spondee, 1 iamb
- Line 9: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 4 iambs
- Line 10: (pentameter) 1 trochee, 4 iambs

Composition

1st Stanza: 'Sad song you love'

The first stanza reads like a daydream the poet is having about a nightingale singing. The bird sings of summer in the shadows of verdant wildwoods. Also of note is Keats' use of mythological imagery. He uses the word *Lethe*, a word I too sometimes use, which in Greek mythology was a river in the underworld that, if one drank from, all memories would be forgotten. The word *hemlock* stands out, since it is usually associated with one's final breath on this earth, perhaps Keats used it as a foreshadowing technique. He also uses the word *dryad*, which in Greek myths is a nymph that lives in the woods. There are other interpretations of this stanza, but in my opinion in view of the entire poem, the shadows represent sorrow, and the summer represents a reflection on the past, a summer full of bliss. In other words, a sad, yet beautiful song of happier times. A clue to this is found in the first line, 'my heartaches,' as though the bird's song affects him as one would upon hearing a sad song you love.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness—
 That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

2nd Stanza: 'Unattainable love'

Here, the poet wishes he could forget all his troubles and be like the nightingale. Leaving all behind and fading into the dim forest. He wishes for unattainable love or the bliss of life, the summer that the songbird sings of; the song of mirth and of dance that the bird must know; he wishes to escape the toils of life. Keats' use of the word Provençal speaks of the countryside of southern France. This area was known for its Troubadour poets, who were known for writing poems penned to an unattainable lover.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm south,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim—

3rd Stanza: 'Dream sequence'

Sometimes in a movie, there is a moment when a character has a dream. Usually, there is a fading effect that leads into the dream. A soft filter can be placed over the camera lens to add to the dreamy effect that the director wishes to create. Here Keats uses a line which gives that very same feeling of the beginnings of a dream, *Fade far away and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known*. The speaker wishes to forget all those cares of the world that the nightingale is free from. Keats once again tells of his great enemy, time, and all the things that confront us as well grow older: namely, aging, illness, and lastly death. And lastly, Keats describes newfound love as losing its luster in time, as a beauty that fades and does not usually last very long.

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

4th Stanza: ‘Fly away’

This stanza begins with a wish to fly away with the nightingale, to enter the magical realm of the verdant forest. And speaks of doing so using the wings of poesy. Poesy is an old term meaning poetry. I do take this to mean that Keats will now write as if he were the nightingale. And in fact, this is just what Keats will now write, as if he were the nightingale. He begins this dramatic sequence by using perhaps his most memorable lines that he ever wrote. One that the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald used as a title to his book *Tender is the Night*, an excerpt from line 35, *Already with thee! tender is the night, / And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne*. As he enters the realm of the nightingale, he speaks of the light of the forest being dim and only lit by the moon. It is a faery tale land, and in fact, Keats uses the word fays to describe the stars surrounding the moon. *Fays* is a late Middle English word that means *fairies* in modern English. In archaic or poetical literature, the spelling *faerie* or *faery* is often used. Fay is derived from the Old French word *fae*, as in the title of the Arthurian character Morgan *le Fay*, hence interpreted as Morgan *the Fairy*.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.
 Already with thee! tender is the night,
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
 But here there is no light,
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

5th Stanza: ‘In the world of the subject’

And so, Keats takes us on a journey into the realm of the nightingale. It is a dark world full of the soft incense of trees. Living in the Sierras, I can relate to this part of the poem so much. The air in the high Sierras is full of the most pleasant scents. Such aromatic airs can only be found in dense and shadowy mountain regions of the world. I often write about cedar trees; here, in the town where I live, the type of cedar that grows is aptly called incense cedar. Thus, in this idyllic dream world full of new life, where time is meaningless, Keats writes about both *embalmèd* springtime memories summed up as *fading violets*, and those of the coming summer as he ponders the future murmuring of insects amongst the budding roses. Though it is a dark forest, it is not a fearful place, but a place of pleasant memories, scents, yet the last line, to me, hints at something unpleasant.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
 But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
 Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
 And mid-May's eldest child,

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

6th Stanza: 'Death's personification'

Keats seamlessly blends the last thoughts of the previous stanza into this one. That last line was all about the sense of sound; the next few verses of full of that very thing, sound. Also, perhaps Keats used the phrase in that last line, *murmurous haunt of flies*, a metaphor for the theme of the next few verses, which speaks of Death personified. This stanza to me is a bit eerie; he did die at a young age, soon after writing this poem. If this were an indication of the quality of odic poems he could have written had he lived to be an old man, one can only speculate on the immense loss his death truly was to the poetry world. Keats often wrote of death throughout his poetry. He speaks of the nightingale singing long after he is dead, almost as if it were a song of remembrance for him. Perhaps Keats felt that this poem would be his most remembered poem long after he was dead. When I write my poetry, I often wonder if this will be the poem I am remembered by. Also, one minor note, I noticed that the *c*-rhymes of lines 5 and 8 in this stanza, unlike all the other stanzas, do not rhyme; perhaps Keats was trying to create an out-of-place feeling or subtly trying to draw the attention of the reader to what is being said.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

7th Stanza: 'Immortality'

In this stanza, he speaks of the immortality of the nightingale's song throughout history as well as in fantasy. In one line, he mentions the Old Testament story of Ruth. He imagines her crying in a field of corn upon hearing the melodious tune of the nightingale. The last three lines talk about the bird's song charming a *ship's window* so that it opens, freeing the bird. The nightingale flies out the window and over the open sea. Yet this sea is no ordinary sea, it is a magical realm. It is here that the nightingale becomes abandoned and forlorn in this strange faery land.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

8th Stanza: 'Back to the real world'

Keats now expands upon the very last word of the previous stanza, focusing on the word forlorn. Here, Keats' haunting refrain, to me, is the best use of repetition in the entire piece. The speaker feels the loneliness of the nightingale itself. And when he does, he is pulled out of the beautiful dream he had and back into the real world again. He calls the nightingale a deceiving elf, much like the sprite *Puck* in Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He says goodbye to the nightingale using the French word *adieu*, which means a long goodbye. The bird's plaintive call fades into the distant hills and mountain streams, till alas, that melodious song can no longer be heard. The last two lines are quite extraordinary, the speaker now wonders if he woke up or if the world of the nightingale was reality.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music—Do I wake or sleep?

Form

A Keatsian Ode: 10 lines

Written in pentameter, save for the 8th written in iambic trimeter.

The poem seems to be divided into two distinct parts: a quatrain followed by a sestet, half-way resembling the Petrarchan sonnet, as that form has a sestet that can have the same rime scheme which Keats uses. The poem seems to be based loosely on the Horatian ode, invented during the 1st century BC by the Greek poet Horace, whose odes were written to ponder, even praise someone or something in great depth. Odes are lyrical pieces having a tranquil quality about them, often delving deeply into themes of art and creativity, human emotions, the natural world, the essence of beauty, and the nature of time and mortality. Horace's stanzas consisted of either 2 or 4 lines and followed a congruent meter and rime pattern. Due to Greek poetry being based on long and short syllables, it is difficult to imitate quantitative meter in the English language, as accentual-syllabic verse is based on the unstressed and stressed syllables.

Rhyme Scheme

abab cdecde

Final Thoughts

Advice on Creating a Smooth Meter and Emotive Lines like Keats

There are five things I would like to emphasize about his poetic voice.

First, his creative use of short and long vowels throughout his poetry. Though he was well-versed in the traditional pattern of alternating between short vowels followed by long vowels, as in line 18:

| and **PUR** | ple-**STAIN** | èd **MOUTH**;

He loved to take a slightly more nuanced approach to meter, like line three, where he takes the long **O** sound found in line one and uses it four times, while alternating between long and short vowels. Thus, his well-placed intermixing of long and short vowels and subtle use of assonance creates the unique melodic resonance his poetry was known for.

| *Or* emptied s**O**me dull *O*piate t**O** the drains

Yet sometimes Keats used a much bolder technique, as in line 12, placing two short and unstressed vowels between two long and stressed vowels as if creating both a major and minor ionic foot:

| **COOL'D** a | **LONG AGE** | in the | **DEEP-DELV** | èd **EARTH**

Second, like myself, Keats was very fond of complex assonance. Many lines in his later works have assonance in them. A great example can be found in line 35:

| Alr (**EA**) d (**Y**) with th (ee!) t(**E**) nnder (**I**) s the n(**I**) ght.

Notice how the **EA** in ready connects in sound to the **E** in ‘tender’, as does the **I** in ‘with’ to the sound of **I** in ‘is’, and the **Y** in ‘already’ to the **E** in ‘tender’. Another example is line 41:

| I c (**A**) nnot s (**EE**) what flowers are (**A**) t my f (**EE**) t.

Notice how the **A** in ‘cannot’ connects in sound to the **A** in ‘at’, as does the **EE** in see to the **EE** in ‘feet’.

Thirdly, there is a technique Keats uses, one I am now starting to apply a bit more to my own works, especially at the end of my lines; and one which I find adds much to the emotive nature of my lines by slowing the reader down a bit as one naturally would do if struck by emotion. It is something called a *caesura*, or line break, which I usually use a comma or line symbol, or a combination of both, for a much longer pause. Keats used this to great effect and sometimes used two or three masculine pauses³ within his lines, as can be seen here:

| The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild.

Fourthly, Keats was a prolific master of repetition; he often repeated consonant sounds, not necessarily on the same lines in short succession, as in poetic assonance, alliteration, and consonance, but throughout his whole poem, I too do a similar thing, in my style: I often repeat a word or sound, perhaps an assonance or consonance or even an alliteration of a word found in the line above, and place that word or sound usually upon the line below; or further down in

my stanza. I have always done so without thinking about it. I guess to me it just sounds very melodic. In this ode, he used a lot of words beginning with the consonants of 'b', 'p' or 'v.' He also used those consonants syzygetically. In other words, used words that have those consonants in them, but not necessarily at the beginning of those words. This adds a certain musical quality to his poem.

Finally, the best advice I can give to any poet trying to write a *Keatsian Ode* is to write from your heart. A poetic meter adds a lot to the melodious nature of any poem, but without the passion of the human heart, a poem can never truly be unique or beautiful. Some of the most beautiful poems I have read are in fact free verse poems, which are totally written from the heart. I always wonder just how much more beautiful those heartfelt words could become if a little bit of meter and rhyme were added. I know myself just how much more beauty is obtained by studying classical techniques. I was for most of my life a free verse poet. Only within the past five years did I begin seeking a different way, a more traditional way to write my poems, and the results are amazing.

1. Though I usually use a forward slash mark (/) when dividing poetic feet, the vertical bar (|) can also be used. For this essay, I will use the latter in my scansion of Keats' meter. ↩

2. The rime pair of *die* and *ecstasy* appears to be a slant rime, as in his poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, where he rimed *Arcady* with *ecstasy*.
↩ ↩

3. There are two types of pauses found in poetry, masculine and feminine: Masculine pauses are more jarring and occur after a stressed syllable, while feminine pauses are more subtle and occur after an unstressed syllable. ↩