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# The Critical Analysis of The Poem "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats through Iser's Theory of the Act of Reading

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**Abstract:** ***This study begins with critically accepted interpretations of the poem "Ode to a nightingale", taken from established critical positions regarding Keats. It shall then move on to peruse Keats in a novel manner, adopting The Act of Reading theory of Wolfgang Iser as a working basis. Iser (1978:958)states "the fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written". "Ode to a nightingale" is a personal poem that describes Keats' journey into the state of Negative Capability. The tone of the poem rejects the optimistic pursuit of pleasure found within Keats' earlier poems and, rather, explores the theme of nature, transience and mortality, the latter being particularly personal of Keats. As with other Romantic poets, Keats focused his writerly attention on understanding and exploring beauty. For Keats, all things possessed potential beauty, and it was his job as a poet to find this beauty and capture it in his poetry. For him, identifying and understanding that which is beautiful allows one to become more acquainted with truth. Unlike some of his contemporary Romantic poets, Keats focused on common and familiar things in his poetic attempts to understand beauty. While Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote about intangible things, Keats focused on more immediate and identifiable things such as the cool dew of an autumn day. In his poetry, Keats attempts to identify and explore the beauty of common things by stripping himself of any personality traits that would potentially dictate his exploration. In this pursuit, he aligned himself with writers such as Shakespeare, whom he saw as being able to discover the beauty in mundane things because he didn't express preferences. This attempt to remove his personality from his pursuit of and description of beauty is a reaction to earlier Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, whom Keats saw as having a sort of poetic obsession with beauty as it exists in the natural world. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to dissect Iser's theory of The Act of Reading on Keats' poem. In other words, this paper is going to present not only syntactic, but also semantic properties of Keats' poem which hold the poems various sections consistent and coherent.***

**Keywords:** act of reading, text, negative capability, beauty and truth

## 1. Introduction

Iser's The Act of Reading theory entails four major concepts: 'repertoire', 'strategies', 'gestalt' and "wandering point", which will be scrutinized with regard to the poem in the following. To illustrate, the repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged (Iser, 1978:69). Through the repertoire, the literary text reorganizes social and cultural norms as well as literary traditions so that reader may reassess their function in real life. A text should be understood as a reaction to the thought systems which it has chosen and incorporated in its own repertoire (Iser, 1978:72). The repertoire assumes a dual function in Iser's model: it reshapes familiar schemata to form a background for the process of communication, and it provides a general framework within which the message or meaning of the text can be organized (Iser, 1978:1). The repertoire includes mostly elements that have been traditionally considered content. As such, it needs a form or structure to organize its presentation, and Iser adopts the term "strategies" to designate this function. Strategies are not mere structural features, rather, they entail both the ordering of materials and the conditions under which those materials are communicated. In Iser's words, they encompass the immanent structure of the text and the acts of comprehension thereby triggered off in the reader (Iser, 1978: 86). These strategies should not be understood as a total organization, nor be viewed as traditional narrative techniques or rhetorical devices, they are instead the structures that underlie such superficial techniques and allow them to have an effect. After all, the ultimate function of the strategies is to defamiliarize the familiar (Iser, 1978: 87).

Considering Iser's concept of gestalt, as readers we cannot achieve the true meaning of this poem but a configurative meaning of it as it is the interpretation of the individual words and verses of the poem that make up a complete literary work. Taking this poem's particular history experience, consciousness, outlook, the individual mind of the reader and the written text lead readers to gestalt theory.

On the other hand, wandering viewpoint is a means of describing the way in which the reader is present in the text. This presence is at a point where memory and expectation converge, and the resultant dialectic movement brings about a continual modification of memory and an increasing complexity of expectation. The reader's travelling through the book is a continuous process of adjustments. We have in our mind some expectations, based on our memory of characters and events, but these expectations and imaginations are continually modified, and these memories are also transformed when we go through the whole text. What we get when we read is not something fixed and completely meaningful at every point, but only a series of continuously changing views (Iser, 1978: 118).

The poem is an expression of Keats' feelings rising in his heart at the hearing of the melodious song of the bird. The song of the nightingale moves from the poet to the depth of his heart and creates in him a heartache and numbness as is created by the drinking of hemlock. He thinks that the bird lives in a place of beauty. When he hears the nightingale's song, he is entrenched by its sweetness and his joy becomes so excessive that it changes into a kind of pleasant pain. He is filled with a desire to escape from the world of cares to the world of beautiful place of the bird.Moreover, Keats puts forward several concepts including life,death, disappointment, failure, sorrow, grief, time, brevity, activities, eating, drinking, nature, animals, landscapes, pastorals, trees, flowers, religion, Christianity, art, sciences, and music.

What is more, this poem highlights the blissful music of the nightingale, but it also has a bleak side. The speaker is desperate to escape the world because it is full of people getting old and dying. Life is just a long parade of miseries, and he thinks it would be better to just go out quietly in the middle of the night. The nightingale's world seems so enchanting that it makes our own world seem like a real drag.

Last but not least,the use of Negative Capability in literature is a concept promoted by poet John Keats, who was of the opinion that literary achievers, especially poets, should be able to come to terms with the fact that some matters might have to be left unsolved and uncertain. Keats was of the opinion that some certainties were best left open to imagination and that the element of doubt and ambiguity added romanticism and specialty to a concept. The best references of the use of negative capability in literature would be of Keats' own works, especially poems such as Ode on a Grecian Urn and Ode to a Nightingale.

**Objectives:**

1) To demonstrate how rhetorical devices can reveal the poetic beauty.
2) To scrutinize the unspoken elements in the poem so as to enrich its elegance.
3) To affirm the assumption that there is a close connection between semantic and syntactic beauty.

**Questions:**

1) How can stylistic elements lead to a better poetic comprehension?
2) How would the unsaid unwrap the structural and versicular beauty?
3) Is there any relationship between poetic elegance and rhetorical devices?

**Methodology**

The poem includes a wide variety of the poet's unspoken motives in terms of stylistic devices. Moreover, rhetorical elements, prolific sensuous imagery, diverse phonological features, romantic attention as well as the whole poetic construction turn this poem into an artistic work worthy of analysis. Having considered the above mentioned points, I am going to analyze both the spoken and unspoken characteristics of the poem. Additionally, the poem is a decent amalgamation of both emotive and syntactic features; therefore, a stylistic method will be applied in order to explore the poem.

## 2. Review of Literature

"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(1968: 41) "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." Nonetheless,Albert Guerard, Jr(1944: 495)argues that the poem contains a "longing not for art but a free reverie of any kind. The form of the poem is that of progression by association, so that the movement of feeling is at the mercy of words evoked by chance, such words as *fade* and *forlorn*, the very words that, like a bell, toll the dreamer back to his sole self." However, Fogle(1968: 43)points out that the terms Guerard emphasizes are "associational translations" and that Guerard misunderstands Keats's aesthetic.After all, the acceptance of the loss of pleasure by the end of the poem is an acceptance of life and, in turn, of death. Death was a constant theme that permeated aspects of Keats poetry because he was exposed to death of his family members throughout his life. Within the poem, there are many images of death. The nightingale experiences a sort of death and even the god Apollo experiences death, but his death reveals his own divine state. As Perkins explains, "But, of course, the nightingale is not thought to be literally dying. The point is that the deity or the nightingale can sing without dying. But, as the ode makes clear, man cannot—or at least not in a visionary way."

With this theme of a loss of pleasure and inevitable death, the poem, according to Claude Finney (1936: 632) describes "the inadequacy of the romantic escape from the world of reality to the world of ideal beauty". Earl Wasserman(1953: 222) essentially agrees with Finney, but he extended his summation of the poem to incorporate the themes of Keats's Mansion of Many Apartments when he says, "the core of the poem is the search for the mystery, the unsuccessful quest for light within its darkness" and this "leads only to an increasing darkness, or a growing recognition of how impenetrable the mystery is to mortals." With these views in mind, the poem recalls Keats's earlier view of pleasure and an optimistic view of poetry found within his earlier poems, especially *Sleep and Poetry*, and rejects them.

Additionally, F. R. Leavis(1936: 144)wrote, "One remembers the poem both as recording, and as being for the reader, an indulgence." Following Leavis, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren(1968: 45) in a 1938 essay, saw the poem as "a very rich poem. It contains some complications which we must not gloss over if we are to appreciate the depth and significance of the issues engaged." Brooks would later argue in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) that the poem was thematically unified while contradicting many of the negative criticisms lodged against the poem.

Perhaps one of the most famous bird poems in English literature, *Ode to a Nightingale* is commonly placed among the greatest works of Keats's Odes. Subtle, fine, more than what its sensuous experience and luxurious indulgence suggest. Critics have strongly supported its claim to the status of a supreme order as the work of a consummateartist. However, it is F.R. Leavis (1962), who demonstrates, in what is in a sense a response to critics before him, the beauty and richness of the Ode as a unified whole in terms of its artistic qualities. Leavis' analysis is a performance in literary criticism which, even before the term was invented, had come very close to what came to be known as New Criticism. He disagrees with Murry's elucidation of the "deep and natural movement of the poet's soul" underlying Keats' poems, for, he, in agreement with Symons, says that Keats "was not troubled about his soul, or any other meta physical questions, to which he shows a happy indifference, or rather, a placid unconsciousness." Leavis (312) also dismisses Matthew Arnold's (1913: 146) equation of Keats' Odes with the works of Shakespeare's mature stage as "extravagantly out," giving his reasons why he thinks Keats' Odes suffer as they do when measured against certain standards governing the actual achievement, on the one hand, and "promise and potentiality," onthe other. Complementing Symons' admiration that Keats "practiced [ahead of time] the theory of art for art's sake," Leavis shows that Keats is a better artist than just an able practitioner of that theory suggests.

On the contrary, Allot is of a different opinion regarding Keats' poem. To elucidate, he asserts that One of the most widely discussed of Keats' poems, *Ode to a Nightingale* charts the rise and fall of the poet's imaginative power and inspiration: it traces the inception, nature and decline of the creative mood, and expresses Keats' attempt to understand his feelings about the contrast between the ideal and actual and the close association of pain with pleasure. (Allott: 524).

In agreement with Matthew Arnold, the Wordsworthian didacticism, which Keats describes as egotistical sublime, Coleridgean naturalizing of the supernatural, Byronic search for an impossible perfection in what he thinks to be a ruined world, and Shelleyan escape into an unrealistic futurist philosophy of Love and Beauty have no place in Keats' sensuous and aesthetic devotion to nature, expressed in concrete and pictorial images. Consistent with his aesthetic ideals of literary art, his great odes, each "uniquely rich and magical tapestry," derive their aesthetic effects from the "inlaid beauties of image and phrase and rhythm"(Bush and Abrams, 1968: 333-4).

Nonetheless, Watson (1992: 365) says that "The pattern of a going-out and return is common in Romantic poetry," which he applies especially to Keats, whom he considers to be "the most self-conscious of young poets." The return is not without a gain in the sense that the poet ultimately discovers that as a human being it is futile to try to escape from what is inescapable or into what is impossible – the fact of the physicality of human condition and hence human mortality and the humanly unreachable state of pure joy and complete perfection respectively. Furthermore, Abrams(1971) calls this movement the Romantic plot of the circular or spiral quest cast in a symbolic mode. Therefore, Watson regards Keats as a realist poet who struggles to depict human life as it is, though it may seem so tragic, purposeless and deterministic at times. In addition, Paul de Man (1966: 24) says: "suffering plays a very important role in Keats' work, but it is always the suffering of others, sympathetically but objectively perceived and so easily generalized into historical and universal pain that it rarely appears in its subjective Immediacy". His intense and altogether genuine concern for others serves, in a sense, to shelter him from the self-knowledge he dreads. He is a man distracted from the awareness of his own mortality by the constant spectacle of the death of others. He can go very far in participating in their agony. The suffering referred to is so general that it designates a universal human predicament. Moreover, the skepticism inherent in the situation – tendency to escape the earthbound condition and the sense of futility at the discovery of the limits of that escape – enhances the quality of the poet's aesthetic appreciation and experience of the bird's song. Thus the Ode "moves outwards and upwards", in Leavis' (315)words, "towards life as strongly as it moves downwards towards extinction; it is, in fact, an extremely subtle and varied interplay of motions, directed now positively, now negatively." When all is said and done, both Watson, Paul de Man as well as Leavis hold the opinion that "Ode to a nightingale" pictures life process as a downward trend which entails vicissitudes, dissatisfaction, pains and futility. However, Matthew Arnold finds Keats as a naturalist poet. According to Arnold(1913: 152),"in one of the two great modes by which poetry interprets, in the faculty of naturalistic interpretation, in what we call natural magic, Keats ranks with Shakespeare." Despite his indebtedness to the literary tradition of the past, Keats establishes an Emersonian "original relation" with nature, independent of his knowledge of history and human society, just as he creates his own stanza-form out of the tradition of two sonnet forms.

## 3. Discussion

Regarding the unsaid, one of the major concepts in The Reading Process by Iser in the title, the reader realizes that the nightingale is a symbol of beauty, immortality, and freedom from the world's troubles. Nightingales are known for singing in the nighttime. In Greek and Roman myth, the nightingale also alludes to the Philomel (Philomela), whose tongue was cut out to prevent her from telling about her rape, and who was later turned into a nightingale by the gods to help her escape from death at the hands of her rapist.

To begin with, the only place that the word nightingale even appears is in the title, but the nightingale and its rich, intoxicating nighttime world are at the center of the poem. As Keats imagines it, this bird lives in its own reality within the enchanting forest. In poetic terms, the nightingale has important connections to mythology. Nonetheless, the most important thing to keep in mind is that it represents a kind of carefree existence that is free from the burdens of time, death, and human concerns. The importance of the nightingale stems from its appearance in Greek myth. Since this is a poem inspired by a Greek form, it is fitting that there are several other allusions to the mythology and culture of ancient Greece in this poem.

Having scrutinized the first stanza:"My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains…", readers can probably tell by the first few words (my heart aches) that this isn't going to be an especially cheery poem. As this stanza unfolds, the speaker compares his mental state to being intoxicated (or even poisoned, as suggested by hemlock), even going so far as to allude, to make reference to the river Lethe. In Greek mythology, the Lethe is a river in the underworld, whose waters will erase the memories of anyone who drinks them, which confirms the concept of Repertoire mentioned by Iser. As the stanza, winds to its conclusion, we learn that the reason behind the speaker's trance-like state is the nightingale's song, which makes the speaker so happy that he can't focus on anything else.

Come to think of the first half of the first stanza, it consists of several comparisons of the speaker to someone who is essentially and totally wasted. Drunk. Here, according to Iser, the reader is forced to confront the alien which is the poem, in other words, to establish affinities with the unfamiliar that is the text. (Iser, 1974, 21). Moreover, in the extended simile of this stanza, opium causes the speaker to lose memory and consciousness, which altogether affect the reader's understanding and remind him of the second concept of Iser named Strategy. Lethe alludes to a river in the Greek afterworld, Hades. Those who drank from it lost their memory. Rhetorically speaking, this stanza alludes to Dryad, in Greek mythology, which is a female spirit attached to a tree.

Reading the second stanza, the reader comes across a Greek myth, "…the blushful Hippocrene…", which was the name of a spring that the winged horse Pegasus created by stamping its hoof into the ground. Drinking from it was supposed to give poetic inspiration. The drink is personified as blushing because of its red color. Furthermore, this stanza refers to images which zoom in on the glass of wine he wants to consume. The popping of bubbles at the top of the glass is compared to winking eyes. Wine stains the reader's mouth purple. To put it another way, we as readers are drawn into the poem to the point where we feel no distance between ourselves and the events depicted, which is what Iser calls Wandering viewpoint since as if reader is present in the text.As well as, the speaker longs for the oblivion of alcohol, expressing his wish for wine, a draught of vintage that would taste like the country and like peasant dances, and let him leave the world unseen and disappear into the dim forest with the nightingale. Needless to say that this stanza is built upon the first stanza's theme of intoxication:

"…ThatI might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim…"

To put it simply, except for the last two lines, this stanza is made entirely of imagery. Imagery is language that stimulates any of the five senses (not just sight, as the word 'image' implies). In imagining the different varieties of wine he wishes to drink, the poem's speaker stimulates our senses of touch (by describing the coolness of the wine), taste ('tasting of Flora and the country green'), hearing (Provençal song), and sight (purple-stained mouth). The last two lines ("that I might drink, and leave the world unseen, and with thee fade away into the forest dim"), however, strike at the stanza's underlying theme: the urge to leave the physical world.

As a matter of fact, the third stanza depicts depressing images: "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget…".The speaker describes the earth as a place where old people suffering from paralysis (palsy) have seizures that shake their last hairs, and young people grow thin as ghosts and then die. Such alien associations, as Iser stipulated, force the reader to reconsider restrictions placed on the text's meanings. In this stanza, beauty and love are both personified. Beauty has nice eyes, but she gets old and the eyes lose their luster. Love, the chubby kid with the bow and arrow, is totally over beauty's eyes at that point. In addition, death is personified as a male – probably the man with the hood and sickle. However, the speaker isn't afraid of death; he actually tries to woo him. This stanza also implies that generations of people are metaphorically hungry because they consume their parents by taking their place. Moreover, lines 71 and 73 in stanza eight, have a parallel structure beginning with a two-syllable exclamation: Forlorn! And Adieu! Which is to say the speaker has been abandoned by the nightingale.

In this stanza, he explains his desire to fade away, saying he would like to forget the troubles the nightingale has never known: "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" of human life, with its consciousness that everything is mortal and nothing lasts. "Youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies, and beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes". To elucidate, the third stanza takes the Ode's dialectic pattern further by directly putting it in the larger context of the reality of human condition--the temporal world of sorrows and sufferings. The contrast between reality and transcendence, advance and withdrawal, is brought to focus by what Leavis calls the "prosaic matter-of-fact" tone of this "completely disintoxicated and disenchanted" stanza. Fogle (1968, 381) considers the stanza as being "low-pitched, by itself unremarkable but functioning as an integral part of the poetic whole."

As can be seen, this stanza gives us a better sense of what the speaker of the poem wants to leave behind by following the nightingale's song. This stanza narrows the focus of theme brought up in the second stanza. The speaker's fundamental problem with the physical world is that nothing lasts forever particularly beauty and love. Indeed, the interpretation of the individual words of this stanza results in comprehending the meaning of love and beauty, which in turn upholds Iser's concept of gestalt.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker uses the metaphor of flight to describe his imaginative journey to join the nightingale. He will fly on the metaphorical wings of his own poetry. This stanza also alludes to Bacchus – the Greek god of wine and drunkenness. In this allusive metaphor, the speaker claims that his escape into the nightingale's world will not be due to drunkenness. Considering this stanza, Keats indulges in pure fantasy in this metaphor comparing the moon and the stars to a queen surrounded by her female attendants.

Moreover, in the fourth stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale to fly away, and he will follow, not through

alcohol, “not charioted by Bacchus and his pards”, but through poetry, which will give him viewless wings. He says he is already with the nightingale and describes the forest glade, where even the moonlight is hidden by the trees, except the light that breaks through when the breezes blow the branches.

This stanza seems a little bit tougher than the ones before it. The reason for this is that Keats has brought in more allusions (like he did with the Lethe in the first stanza) to mythology. Bacchus is the Roman god of wine (called Dionysius by the Greeks), who was often depicted as riding in a chariot drawn by leopards (or pards, as Keats called them). The Queen-Moon and Fays refer to the fairies in European legends.

By alluding to these mythical figures, Keats emphasizes the difference between the gloomy physical world, “But here there is no light”, and the dreamlike, spiritual world of the nightingale. Fortunately, Keats also acknowledges that he can use the “viewless wings of Poesy” (poetry) to experience an amount (however small) of the nightingale's world.

Come to think of the fifth stanza, the plants in the dark forest are compared to incense, or a really fragrant substance. Putting aside our bad memories, Keats thinks this incense is a good smell. Additionally, exploring the fantastical forest, the speaker uses several images of plants and flowers.This stanza shifts our attention back to the physical world. Once more, in this stanza the reader comes across some rhetorical devices such as metaphor, allusion and symbol which back up Iser’s concept of “Strategies”.

Much like the second stanza, the fifth stanza exists mostly to stimulate the reader's senses (especially the sense of smell). The speaker admits that his vision is failing him (either due to his altered mental state or simply because it's dark), but this only makes his sense of smell stronger. Turning his attention to the scents of the embalmed darkness (which hints, once again, at the presence of death), the speaker practically bombards our noses with the smells of the forest (grass, fruit trees, and flowers). The last line (“the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves”) however, appeals to our sense of hearing, drawing our attention to the murmuring of flies on summer evenings. What is more, Keats’ intelligent description of senses here converges the memory and expectation of the reader and makes him present in the text via a continuous process of adjustment that underscores the concept of wandering viewpoint proposed by Iser.

The outpouring of joy in the magic realm of starry sky and moon-lit landscapeindicates that the fourth and the fifth stanzas mark the climax of the poem. Keats’keen perception, penetrating to the essence of things, provides him with intimations ofimmortality and transcendence. The joy and happiness felt in an abstract way in thefirst and second stanzas seem to be "repeated in a finer tone," to use a phrase of Keats’s, in the marvelously pictorial fifth stanza: I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs, but, in embalmed 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 murmuroushaunt of flies on summer eves”. As the poet points "not to dissolution and unconsciousness but to positive satisfactions, concretely realized in imagination," there occurs a "rich evocation of enchantment and delighted senses," with "the touch of the consummate artist; in the very piling up of luxuries a sure delicacy presides" (Leavis: 317).

When it comes to the sixth stanza, the speaker listens in the dark to the nightingale, saying that he has often been half in love with the idea of dying and called death soft names in many rhymes. Surrounded by the nightingale’s song, the speaker thinks that the idea of death seems richer than ever, and he longs to cease upon the midnight with no pain while the nightingale pours its soul ecstatically forth. If he were to die, the nightingale would continue to sing, he says, but he would have ears in vain and be no longer able to hear.

This stanza offers readers a somewhat unsettling revelation. The speaker doesn't just want to transcend the limits of the physical world. He actually wants to die, “now more than ever seems it rich to die”. The reasons for this desire, however, are more complex than misery. Rather, as he hinted in the first stanza, the speaker feels so content and complete when he hears the nightingale's song that he wouldn't mind dying. Furthermore, the speaker notes that the nightingale's song would continue long after his death:“still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain to thy high requiem become a sod”, which means the speaker imagines his death, and uses musical composition called a "requiem," which is performed after someone's death. At this point, Keats refers to a social and cultural tradition of singing a eulogy song which is in line with Iser’s concept of Repertoire as it is a familiar schemata to form a background for communicating with the reader.

Noticing the seventh stanza, the speaker talks directly to the nightingale, which obviously cannot hear or respond. This poetic technique is called apostrophe. Also, readers may criticize the speaker for believing (mistakenly, of course) that the nightingale is immortal. However,for readers it may seem just an example of hyperbole, or intentional exaggeration to make a point. The point is that it is the nightingale's song that echoes through history and outlives each individual bird. The speaker imagines that the same song of the nightingale has been heard throughout history, and he alludes to the Book of Ruth in the Bible in order to express the song's deep and piercing sadness. Last but not least, he imagines the bird flying out an open window over the remote ocean in a fantasy world filled with faeries.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale that it is immortal, that it was not born for death. He says that the voice he hears singing has always been heard, by ancient emperors and clowns, by homesick Ruth; he even says the song has often charmed open magic windows looking out over the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

To clarify, this stanza isbuilt upon the idea that the nightingale's song is eternal, focusing on how long this song

has been heard. Obviously, Keats doesn't mean that the same bird has been alive for thousands of years. Rather, he is suggesting that the beauty of the natural world has fascinated (and sometimes bewitched) humanity for generations upon generations. Once again, we're faced with another allusion. When the speaker mentions the sad heart of Ruth, he is referring to the Biblical story of Ruth, a widow who travels to Bethlehem (where she lives off alien corn taken from the fields), only to marry a farmer. Keats then balances this Biblical story with the pagan idea of "of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn". Last but not least, for readers to figure out the accurate meaning of this stanza, they have to resort to the gestalt concept of Iser since the interpretation of the individual words and verses make up the total consistent comprehension of it.

Considering the eighth stanza, in frustration, the speaker turns on the personified idea that has made this whole poem possible: fancy, or imagination. He compares fancy to a mischievous little elf who likes to fool people. In this case, the trick is making the speaker think he could ever join the nightingale.

In the eighth stanza, the word *forlorn* tolls like a bell to restore the speaker from his preoccupation with the nightingale and back into himself. As the nightingale flies farther away from him, he laments that his imagination has failed him and says that he can no longer recall whether the nightingale's music was a vision, or a waking dream. Now that the music is gone, the speaker cannot recall whether he himself is awake or asleep.

Equally important, in this stanza, the speaker essentially snaps out of it, brought back to his sole self by the sound of the word forlorn in the previous stanza. It is at this point that he realizes the nightingale's song (even if it is immortal) will not always be within his range of hearing "Adieu! Adieu! Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades past the near meadows, over the still stream, up the hill-side". This is a crucial insight for the speaker, who until this moment has wanted nothing more than to leave the physical world and follow the nightingale into a different, higher realm. Nevertheless, some traces of the speaker's trance-like state remain, because the poem closes with the question. And finally the last two lines of this stanza demonstrate that the speaker cannot decide what is real and what is not. He asks two rhetorical questions to express his confusion:
"Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Do I wake or sleep"?
Over the course of its eighth stanza, the poem alternates between the physical world of the speaker and the eternal world of the nightingale, using allusion, references to other pieces of literature or mythology, and imagery, language that affects the reader's senses. Ultimately, the speaker realizes the nightingale's song is just as fleeting as everything else around him, and he is left to wonder whether he is dreaming or awake.

Furthermore, there are two poles in a literary text: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. Somewhere between the poles is the literary work, which readers create by reading or realizing a text (Iser, 1974: 274).

To enunciate, regarding the artistic pole proposed by Iser, the speaker rejected all artistic effort of the author. In Psyche, he was willing to embrace the creative imagination, but only for its own internal pleasures. But in the nightingale's song, he finds a form of outward expression that translates the work of the imagination into the outside world, and this is the discovery that compels him to embrace Poesy's viewless wings at last. The art of the nightingale is endlessly changeable and renewable; it is music without record, existing only in a perpetual present. As befits his celebration of music, the speaker's language, sensually rich though it is, serves to suppress the sense of sight in favor of the other senses. He can imagine the light of the moon, but here there is no light; he knows he is surrounded by flowers, but he "cannot see what flowers" are at his feet. This suppression will find its match in ode on a Grecian Urn, which is in many ways a companion poem to ode to a nightingale. In the later poem, the speaker will finally confront a created art-object not subject to any of the limitations of time; in nightingale, he has achieved creative expression and has placed his faith in it, but that expression—the nightingale's song—is spontaneous and without physical manifestation.

Taking the aesthetic pole into account as held forth by Iser, John Keats' ode to a nightingale is a different flavor of romanticism. There are no dancing daffodils or peaceful shepherds to be found here. Keats' ode to a nightingale is an excellent example of romantic poetry. The poem explores the ideas of mortality, ecstasy, and impermanence. Because the poem is an ode, it directly addresses or talks to its subject, always keeping the nightingale as the focus of the poem's action.

Generally speaking, in terms of the unsaid brought forth by Iser, three main thoughts stand out for the reader in this poem. One is Keats' evaluation of life; life is a vale of tears and frustration. The happiness which Keats hears in the song of the nightingale has made him happy momentarily but has been succeeded by a feeling of torpor which in turn is succeeded by the conviction that life is not only painful but also intolerable. His taste of happiness in hearing the nightingale has made him all the more aware of the unhappiness of life. Keats wants to escape from life, not by means of wine, but by a much more powerful agent, the imagination.Keats' poetry also expresses unwritten and unspoken sensuous uses of language. The sensuousness of Keats is a striking characteristic of his entire poetry. All his poems including his great odes connote rich sensuous appeal. The odes, which represent the highest poetic achievement of Keats, are replete with sensuous pictures.

The second main thought and the main theme of the poem is Keats' wish that he might die and get rid of life altogether, providing he could die as easily and painlessly as he could fall asleep. The heavy weight of life pressing down on Keats forced "ode to a nightingale" out of him. Keats more than once expressed a desire for easeful death, yet when he was in the final stages of tuberculosis he fought against death by going to Italy where he hoped the climate would cure him. The death-wish in the ode is a passing but recurrent attitude toward a life that was unsatisfactory in so many ways.

The third main thought in the ode is the power of imagination or fancy. (Keats does not make any clear-cut distinction between the two.) In the ode Keats rejects wine for poetry, the product of imagination, as a means of identifying his existence with that of the happy nightingale. But poetry does not work the way it is supposed to. He soon finds himself back with his every day, trouble-filled self. That "fancy cannot cheat so well as she is fam'd to do," he admits in the concluding stanza. The imagination is not the all-powerful function Keats, at times, thought it was. It cannot give more than a temporary escape from the cares of life.

In terms of meter and form, the poem has eight separate stanzas of ten lines each, and the meter of each line in the stanza, except for the eighth, is Iambic pentameter. The eighth line is written in iambic *trimeter*, which means it has only six syllables per line instead of ten.

Iambic pentameter is the most common meter in English. In iambic pentameter, lines are ten syllables long and an unaccented syllable is followed by an accented one (it sounds like da-DUM da-DUMda-DUMda-DUM da-DUM). For example, in line 2:

My ***sense***, | as ***though*** | of ***hem***|-lock ***I*** | had ***drunk***

Keats does an excellent job of keeping the meter pretty regular through the poem, without making it sound awkward or strained. At some places, he even adds a syllable to certain words in order to fit the rhythm, like in line 44: But, ***in*** | em-***balm***|-ed***dark***|-ness ***guess*** | each ***sweet***

In this line, the "-ed" of "embalmed" is pronounced as a separate syllable; it's an old poetry trick that Shakespeare also used.

As readers, we probably have also noticed that the poem has a rhyme scheme of ABABCDECDE. Keats experimented with several different patterns of rhyme in his various odes, but there's nothing too complicated about this one. Keats's attitude towards nature developed as he grew up. In the early poems, it was a temper of merely sensuous delight, an unanalyzed pleasure in the beauty of nature.The initial situation of awareness and conflict is slowly to change and develop throughout the ode with a corresponding shift in tone. The tragic awareness of suffering inflicts on him a peculiar kind of ache because the opposing effect of dullness, which is the effect of desire, is increasing. The awareness is a burden that makes him 'sunk' gradually towards the world of oblivion.

After describing his plight, Keats acknowledges, rather than envy the bird's happy lot and participates in its permanent happiness. He identifies the bird with Dryad, the Greek Goddess of the tree. He contrasts the mortality and suffering of human being with the immortality and perfect happiness of the nightingale. Of course, Keats immortalizes the bird by thinking of the race of it as the symbol of universal and undying musical voice, which is the voice of nature, and also of ideal romantic poetry, of the world of art and spirit. This universal and eternal voice has comforted human beings embittered by life and tragedies by opening the casement of the remote, magical, spiritual, eternal, and the ideal. The poet is longing for the imaginative experience of an imaginatively perfect world. At this stage in the poem, the poet is trying to escape from the reality, and experience the ideal rather than complement one with the other. This dualism is to resolve later. Keats begins by urging for poison and wine, and then desires for poetic and imaginative experience.

However, as the poem develops, reader feels that the numbness and intoxication the poet deliberately and imaginatively imposes upon his senses of pain are meant to awaken a higher sense of experience. The vintage, dance and song, the waters of poetic inspiration are the warmth of the south together make a compound and sensuous appeal.

Besides, Keats develops a dialectic by partaking both the states – the fretful here of man and the happy there of the nightingale – andserves as the mediator between the two. After activating the world of insight and inner experience by obliterating that of the sense, Keats is revived into a special awareness of the conflict. With this awareness, he moves into a higher thematic ground moving from the ache of the beginning through yearning for permanence and eventually exploring the tension so as to balance the transient with the permanent. Besides, the process of experience he has undergone has undoubtedly left him with a heightened awareness of both the modes of experience. When the imaginative life wakes, the pressures of ordinary experience is benumbed; and when ordinary experience becomes acute, the intensity of imaginative reality is reduced and this makes life and experience more complete.

Regarding musicality, the rapture of poetic inspiration matches the endless creative rapture of the nightingale's music and lets the speaker, in stanzas five through seven, imagine himself with the bird in the darkened forest. The ecstatic music even encourages the speaker to embrace the idea of dying of painlessly succumbing to death while enraptured by the nightingale's music and never experiencing any further pain or disappointment. But when his meditation causes him to utter the word "forlorn," he comes back to himself, recognizing his fancy for what it is—an imagined escape from the inescapable (Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well as she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf). As the nightingale flies away, the intensity of the speaker's experience has left him shaken, unable to remember whether he is awake or asleep.

By all means, this poem is structured to make readers think that the speaker is intoxicated by the music of the nightingale, which leads him to dream of fading off into a blissful nothingness, much like a really drunk person. To put it simply, as Iser proposed, the reader comes across indeterminacy in this poem since Keats has not set the whole picture before reader's eyes. As a matter of fact, the poem is the ultimate dream of escapism. The speaker needs a getaway, experience night from the nightingale's perspective, surrounded by dark and fragrant trees. It takes him back through history and into the realms of fairies and magic. But, by the end, the speaker's imagination fails to keep the bird from flying away, and he turns on his own

fancy in anger. For the Romantics like Keats, fancy was just a synonym for imagination.

Readers think the scene with the nightingale singing in the forest of night would have made the perfect backdrop for a love story; in other words, this poem seems kind of steamy for them. Instead, what they get is a guy whispering sweet nothings to death. Nobody ruins a potentially steamy moment like death.

To sum up, referring to Iser, at this point the gaps in this poem are partly bridged; the poem is rather connected and the blanks disappeared even though it would be still left inexhaustible in terms of various readers' realizations.Keats soars high with his wings of poesy into the world of ideas and perfect happiness. But the next moment, consciousness makes him land on the grounds of reality and he bids farewell to the ideal bird. At this moment, Keats must also have been conscious that the very bird, which he had idealized and immortalized, existed in the real world, mortal and vulnerable to change and suffering like himself. In addition, taking Iser's theory of The Act of Reading into consideration, this poem is inexhaustible and it is capable of different realizations. Furthermore, regarding Negative Capability proposed by Keats, there is no absolute and objective interpretation of the poem as it varies from one reader to another; therefore, some matters might have to be left unsolved and uncertain.

## 4. Conclusion

Having taken into accountIser's theory of The Act of Reading, it can be realized that the poem's genuine meaning can by no means be grasped via the subjective interpretation of the readers. In fact, any piece of literature is a hotchpotch of both syntactic and semantic constituents which altogether form the ultimate consistent comprehension of it. In addition, regarding the poem, Keats artistically depicts human emotion and perception through his metaphoric use of nightingale. Furthermore, the bird pictures a world which is so glamorous and real. According to Iser, perusing the poem gets the reader alienated and makes him defamiliarize the text each time s/he reads it; that is to say, the reader becomes enthusiastic to embrace the creative imagination. Last but not least, Keats has demonstrated the human ephemeral life against the perpetual music of the nightingale. Finally, as readers we cannot escape into the intended world of the author. Imaginative minds can have a momentary flight into the fanciful world, but ultimately one has to return to the real world and must accept the reality. John Keats is no exception to this. He makes imaginative flights into the ideal world, but accepts the realities of life despite its fever, fret and fury.As a matter of fact, referring to Iser, at this point the gaps in this poem are partly bridged, the poem is rather connected and the blanks disappeared even though it would be still left inexhaustible in terms of various readers' realizations.Moreover, readers' imagination was exercised upon those as yet unwritten, unsaid and indeterminate elements to mirror their disposition and interpretation.

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