



## Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians

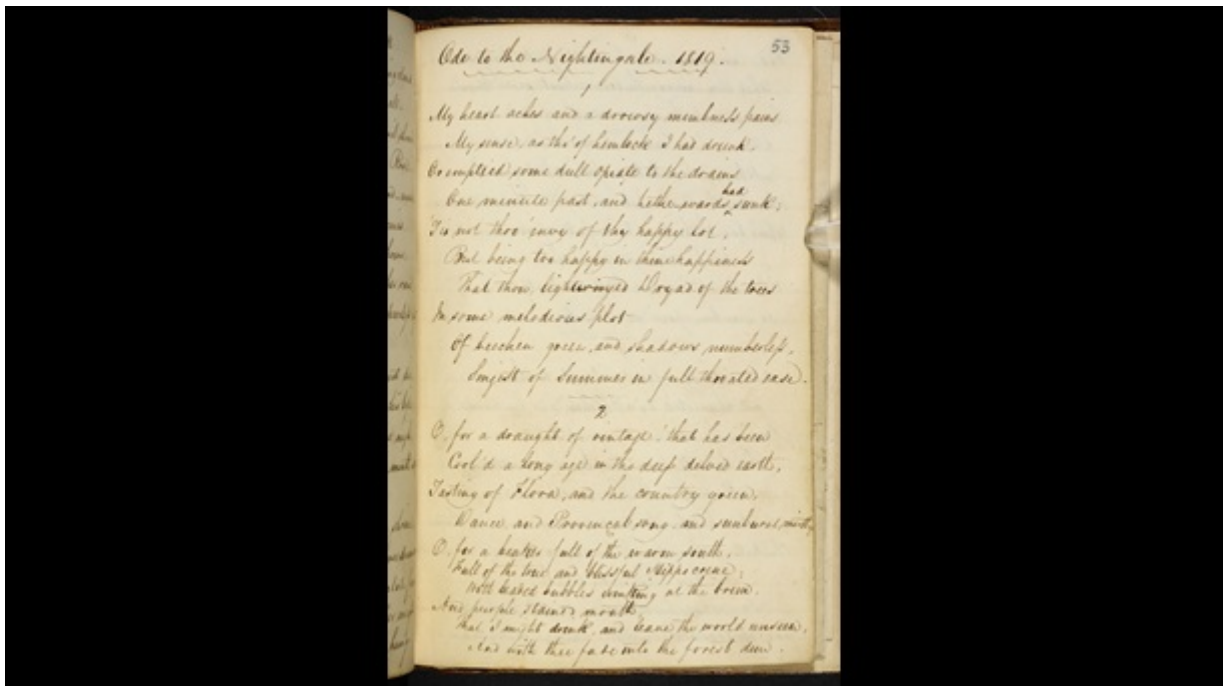
### An introduction to 'Ode to a Nightingale'

- Article written by: [Stephen Hebron](#)
- Theme: [Romanticism](#) [[/romantics-and-victorians/themes/romanticism](#)]
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The nightingale has longstanding literary associations, but Keats's famous ode was inspired by a real-life nightingale as much as by previous poetry. Stephen Hebron considers how Keats uses the bird to position poetic imagination between the mortal and the immortal.

'[Ode to a Nightingale](#) [[/works/ode-to-a-nightingale](#)]' is one of the five great odes [John Keats](#) [[/people/john-keats](#)] composed in the summer and autumn of 1819. It was first published in July that year, in a journal called *Annals of the Fine Arts*, and subsequently in Keats's third and final publication, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* [[/works/lamia-isabella-the-eve-of-st-agnes-and-other-poems](#)] (1820).

### Manuscript of 'Ode to a Nightingale' by John Keats



'Ode to the Nightingale' from a manuscript copy believed to be in the hand of George Keats, the poet's brother.

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# Composition

The weather in the summer of 1819 was exceptionally fine. Keats was living in semi-rural Hampstead; he had fallen in love with his neighbour, Fanny Brawne, and was enjoying a period of fruitful and confident composition. 'O there is nothing like fine weather', he wrote to his sister Fanny in May, 'and health, and Books, and a fine country, and contented Mind, and Diligent-habit of reading and thinking' (17 April). Keats's friend and housemate Charles Brown later recalled a particularly memorable day that month. A nightingale had built a nest near their house and one morning Keats, who been delighted by the nightingale's song, sat under a plum tree in the garden and remained there for several hours, composing. He eventually returned with some scraps of paper which, according to Brown, contained the 'Ode to a Nightingale.'<sup>[1]</sup>

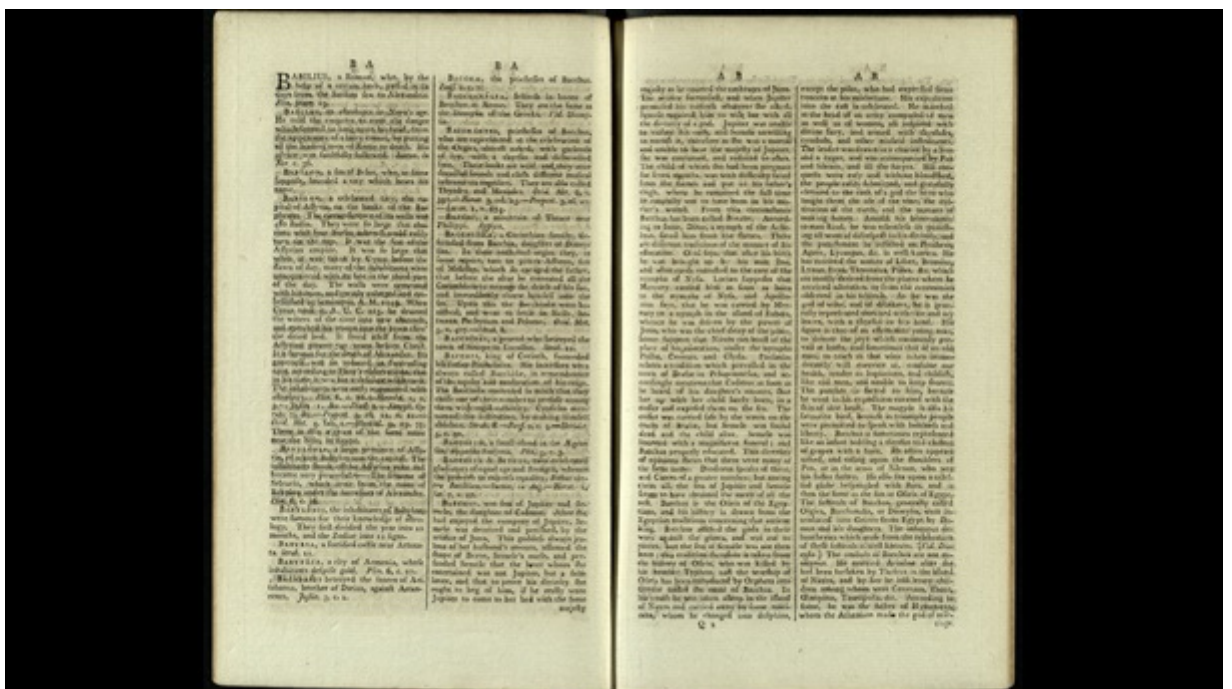
Brown paints an idyllic scene, and the nightingale was certainly an apt subject for Keats's pen, for it had a long literary association with poetic inspiration. [John Milton](https://www.bl.uk/people/john-milton) [<https://www.bl.uk/people/john-milton>], in a sonnet published in his 1645 *Poems*, had praised its 'liquid notes that close the eye of Day', and [Andrew Marvell](https://www.bl.uk/people/andrew-marvell) [<https://www.bl.uk/people/andrew-marvell>], in 'The Mower to the Glow-worms' had observed how 'The Nightingale does sit so late, / And studying all the summer night, / Her matchless songs does meditate'.

# Immortal beauty

'Ode to a Nightingale' is not, however, a simple description of arcadian bliss, but an intense meditation on the contrast between the painful mortality that defines human existence and the immortal beauty found in the nightingale's carefree song; and it considers poetry's ability to create a kind of rapt suspended state between the two.

The opening stanza of the poem establishes its entranced, almost hallucinatory mood. We are in an obscure, rich world. The poet is drowsy and numb, as if he had taken hemlock or opiates (both medicinal sedatives), or been immersed in the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Greek myth. Pursuing this theme, in the second stanza Keats celebrates the way wine ('vintage') evokes the sun-drenched landscape of classical pastoral: the 'warm south' of France, Greece and Italy; Flora, the Italian goddess of flowering plants, and Hippocrene, the fountain on Helicon, a mountain in Greece sacred to the Muses. Wine also promises temporary release from the dreadful realities described in the third stanza, and Keats, who had recently lost his younger brother Tom to tuberculosis, and who had trained as a surgeon, knew well the world in which 'youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies'.

# Lemprière's Classical Dictionary



John Keats's learnt about Greek mythology from titles such as Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*. This page includes the entry for Bacchus who is incorporated into 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

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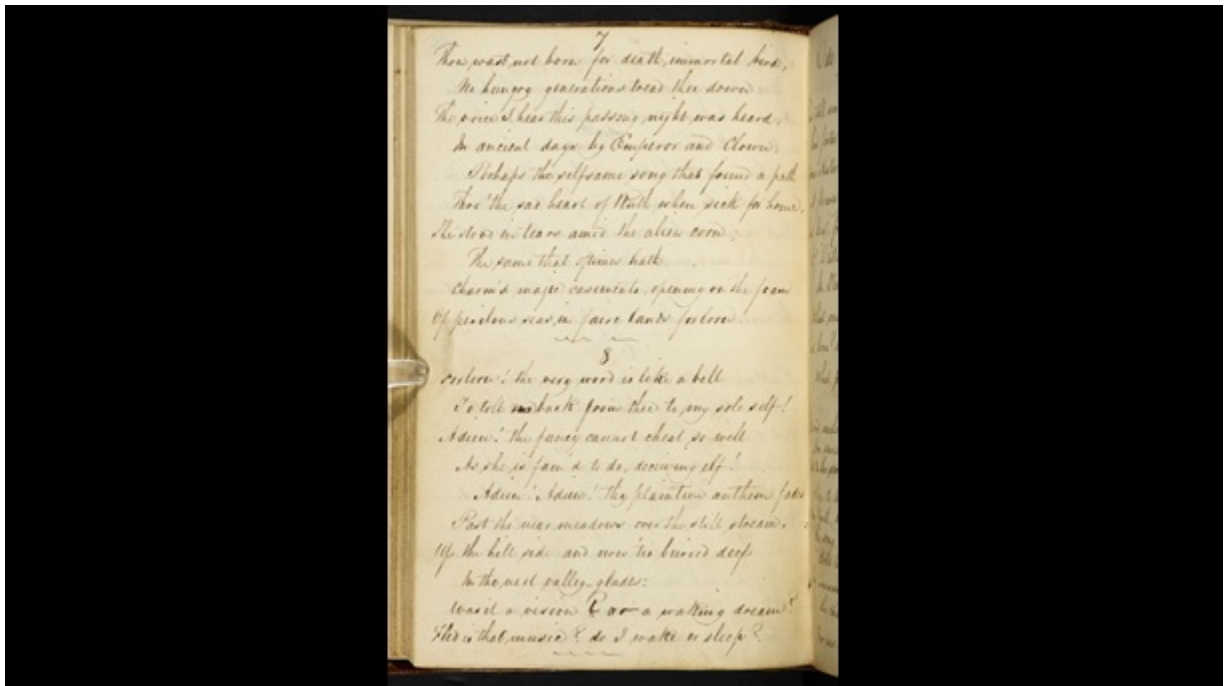
## A magical arbour conjured up by the poet's imagination

In stanzas 4–5 we move from the momentary pleasures of Bacchus to something apparently more sustainable: a magical arbour conjured up by the poet's imagination ('the viewless wings of Poesy'). It is a place of soft scents and haunting murmurs, where the 'Queen-moon' lives with her fairy attendants ('starry fays'), and the unseen flowers, fruits and trees are strangely distinct. Within this rich nook of the imagination, protected from dull reality, 'easeful Death' has, for the poet, a powerful allure, and in stanza 6 he imagines a kind of consummation with the nightingale in which he expires while listening to the bird's ecstatic song:

*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!*

But he knows that while the immortal bird would continue singing, he would be no more than an inert, insensible mass: 'Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain – / To thy high requiem become a sod.'

## Manuscript of 'Ode to a Nightingale' by John Keats



The final stanzas of 'Ode to a Nightingale' from a manuscript copy believed in be in the hand of George Keats, the poet's brother.

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## Returning to his 'sole self'

With this realisation the poet loses his imagined intimacy with the nightingale. Where he is weighed down by the heavy tread of history, the bird moves easily through time and space,

its unchanging song heard by people of all types ('emperor and clown'), by figures from the remote past (the biblical Ruth) and in far-off lands:

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

The word 'forlorn', in the sense of lost or deserted, brings the poet abruptly back to his 'sole self', and the stark immediacy of human existence. It is significant that the poem should turn on a word, rather than a sound or a thought, as it has been about the ability of language, and the imagination, to escape reality and create a world of its own. As the nightingale's song fades he accuses his imagination of deceitfulness, for it can cheat him into believing certain things, but not to such an extent that he is unaware of being cheated.

Yet Keats concludes the poem with unresolved questions. He has been beguiled both by the music of the nightingale and by his own poetic skill, which is everywhere evident in his brilliant evocations of tangible existence, from the quick, mercurial movements ('light-winged') and effortless existence ('full-throated ease') of the nightingale, to the 'verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways' of his poetic bower, and the 'leaden-eyed despairs' of human life. He cannot therefore dismiss what he has dimly perceived and described, for this may, indeed, be the true reality:

*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?*

## Footnotes

[1] *The Keats Circle*, ed. by H E Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), ii, p. 65.

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