

NWRPA Newsletter April 2021

My Heart Aches: Therapy and an *Ode to a Nightingale*

Meg Harris Williams

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Summary by Frank Kelley

In her absorbing and richly detailed Zoom talk Meg provided a close reading of a poem – Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* – to help make vivid and imaginable the progression towards self-knowledge that therapy can facilitate.

Meg Harris Williams is a writer and artist with a particular interest in the relationship between therapy and aesthetic experience. She is editor of the Harris Meltzer Trust, an educational charity publishing books that promote psychoanalytic understanding of children and young people. Her website is <http://www.artlit.info/>

Like our Dr. Mark Fisher, Meg values *On the sense of loneliness* a late paper by Melanie Klein (1963). Loneliness is a theme of Keats's poems as is understanding without words. He is a poet of what cannot be said.

The full text of this poem is in a downloadable .pdf document on the NWRPA website at: <https://www.nwrpa.org.uk/april-2021-ode-to-a-nightingale/>

John Keats and his poetry will be of great interest to therapists. There was trauma in his life. In 1804, when Keats was aged eight, his father Thomas died from a skull fracture after falling from his horse. His mother Frances remarried two months later, but left her new husband soon afterwards. In 1810, when Keats was 14 she died of tuberculosis.

Keats was in a parental role with his brother Tom. In the winter of 1818-19 he was unable to write poetry and his letters to Tom were his only literary expressions.

Poetry gave Keats an internal conversation that was more intimate than any external communication. A world that was soul making. He was trying to get out of depression where the world was a vale of tears. His poetry was also a system of theology, the intelligence of the spark from God. In *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819) the internal conversation was between Keats and the internal object of the nightingale as the poet's muse.

The poem opens with slow, heavy, ponderous phrases.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

The poet's heart aches in comparison to the lightness of the nightingale who is detached from the troubles of the world. So there is no communication at all and no internal communication with parts of the self. The nightingale is:

*That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot*

Keats's work is a reminder of the tradition of the pleasures of poetry and poetry as an intoxicant. We can drink and drink and fade away, an escapism that becomes worse and worse. Thinking is full of sorrow and leaden despair. Keats is a sensuous poet but this does not help in transforming the ache of the heart. For the first few stanzas there is no way out of the world of pain.

Keats had a love/hate relationship to the earlier poet John Milton. He found his absorption in the work of Milton supportive at difficult times. This inspired the line from *Ode to a Nightingale*.

That I might drink and leave the world unseen

We can lose the capacity to see and be unseen as we do in the forest with the nightingale.

Wilfred Bion talked of the psychoanalytic situation as trying to capture the truth, the core emotional part of the analytic session.

Instead of Bacchus we have the Goddess of Poetry.

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne

Keats opens his Ode with the ponderous ache of the heart. Now we have an ebb and flow, like the movement between the object and the self. The moon is glimpsed through the previously impenetrable forest, a metaphorical unconscious. There is a gradual illumination, an intensification of the present moment.

Here the poet closes his eyes and imagines:

*Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death*

Easeful death is not a literal death but ceasing to struggle, a persuasive state of ecstasy. The rhythm of poetry carries you along. Immortality and ecstasy go together in a hypnotised idealised state for which the nightingale sings a requiem.

Then the poet realises this idealised state is an illusion. He knows he is no longer using the nightingale. The poem changes and it is no longer just the poet and the nightingale. Humanity enters the poem. Poetry is used for humanity rather than purely for the poet.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

The song of the nightingale has entered the human situation. The song enters painful states of mind which no longer need to be converted into ecstasy or intoxication. The music has got into humanity. The point of the nightingale is not for a requiem but so song enters into what Wordsworth called *the still sad music of humanity*.

Does imagination tell us something about our reality? Can we still hear the nightingale when it has gone? Poetry feeds the minds of future generations. The poem is an internal dialogue with the muse. Another of Keats metaphors for poetry is *learning to fly*.

All pain begins with *my heart aches*. These are painful feelings which we do not experience. They have to be transformed and their meaning discovered. You cannot do anything about past traumas but you can know yourself and be constructive.

So thank you to Meg Harris Williams for a therapist's illumination of a familiar poem and a poet's illumination of our therapeutic work.