

## The Immortal Birds in *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Sailing to Byzantium*

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### Abstract:

*This paper attempts to compare Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats and Sailing to Byzantium by William Butler Yeats in terms of the bird image which is found throughout their poems. By means of poetic elements they use, they make it clear that they both wish to be immersed in the artistic world of the birds rather than stay in their mortal world. Though there are similarities in both poems, Keats was only 24 and Yeats was 63 when they wrote their poems, so this age difference between the poets results in some differences. Keats seems to be more sensitive than Yeats, whose reason and life experience are dominant in his poem.*

**Key words:** Ode to a Nightingale, Sailing to Byzantium, bird image, eternity, reality.

### INTRODUCTION

In *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats and *Sailing to Byzantium* by William Butler Yeats, the bird image is used by both poets in a search for gaining immortality through it by making use of artistic elements. They both describe the birds in a way that they want to be free of the burden of the material

world. In *A Defense of Poetry*, Percy Bysshe Shelley describes a poet as “a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feels that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why” (qtd. by Khan, 78). In his poem, Keats seeks for a way to join the joyful world of the nightingale and leave his dark, frustrating world, whereas Yeats looks for a way to become a golden bird with an eternal youth. Therefore, as sensitive poets, they refuse to accept that they belong to this restricted world of harsh realities, but a world where they will no longer feel alone with their songs, far away from those who are not capable of understanding their artistic qualities.

At the beginning of *Ode to a Nightingale*, though it seems that the ache the poet feels refers to "poisoning", it becomes more apparent that he immediately lightens with the splendid, lively song of the nightingale when he explains he is not jealous of the bird's happiness: “Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness” (5, 6). The poet is struggling to go into the artistic, spiritual world of the bird that he thinks is "country green" (13). With “a draught of vintage” (11), he thinks of a magnificent world filled with "Provençal song" (14) and "dance" with sunshine, which takes him away to a joyful place by making his problems resulting from the misery of his world disappear. The mythological references show Keats's longing for the immortality:

The reference to the mythological Hippocrene is particularly significant, for, as the fountain of the never-dying Muses, it contrasts with the earlier reference to the mythological Lethe as the river of forgetfulness and becomes a symbol of the poetic aspirations for permanence and immortality. (Khan 83)

In the first and second stanzas, in order to forget about all the troubles and sufferings in his life, he aspires to drink from Lethe and be immortal through “Full of the true, the blushful

Hippocrene” (16). He yearns for a world that lacks “The weariness, the fever, and the fret” (23) none of which he argues the nightingale knows in its own world to which Keats tries to go in order to escape from the world “Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (26). He wants to get lost with the nightingale, but the third stanza makes it clear that he is well aware of the mortality of everything surrounding his world which cannot be sensed by the bird. He tells the bird to forget the “The weariness, the fever, and the fret” in his world where anyone and anything beautiful are condemned to fade away. Therefore, he cannot expect the bird to understand the desperate, sorrowful man like him. He is really worried about nobody can have the everlasting beauty in the real world surrounded with the illness, deterioration and death. It is very obvious that the poet envies the nightingale for being a bird that has never experienced the misery of human kind.

Despite his feeling the happiness of the nightingale, “the train of associations then brings before the speaker's mind all the harsh, sad realities of human existence that he wishes to forget, and makes him realize that ‘Bacchus and his pards’ (line 32) do not afford any permanent, meaningful escape from life's ‘annoyances’.” (Lau 59) It can be asserted that Keats’s feelings are confused as he declares that he is full of joy with the nightingale, but then suddenly he returns to the annoying real world in which “youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (26). In the fourth stanza, he feels himself together with the bird as if he is communicating with it and tells it to go away so he can follow it to be away from the darkness of his world where “there is no light” (38). In the sixth stanza he expresses his love for “easeful Death” (52) and says he has “Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme” (53). As a mortal human being, he might be in the opinion of the fact that calling soft names will make him get used to the idea of dying and prevent him from the unbearable thought of the pain it gives. He says he won’t be able to listen to its song anymore though it will go on

singing after his death. In the seventh stanza, he calls the bird that is “not born for death” (61) as immortal whose voice was heard by emperors in ancient times and will be heard centuries later when Keats no longer can write to make himself heard. Despite the softness of the words he chooses to refer to death, “in the last two lines of the stanza, however, he forcefully recognizes that death would actually terminate all sensation and experience, including that of the nightingale’s song” (Lau, 60). No matter how much he tries, he cannot see death as the ultimate solution to ease his sufferings because he becomes sorrowful again when he realizes he will not see it singing “In such an ecstasy” (58).

Like Keats, Yeats is also sorrowful for the transitory lives of human beings in a world where nothing is everlasting, which is apparent in the lines:

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies. (4, 5, 6)

He does not want to accept the fact that everything will eventually disappear, so he longs for going to a place where he can be away from the mortality of the real world. He is really disturbed by eventually turning into an old man because he thinks "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" (9, 10). He is sure that he has no importance as a man as he gets older. He is desperate because he is aware of his aging body which gets deteriorated as days pass and unfortunately has nothing to do to prevent the indispensable end. His “Monuments of unageing intellect (8)” refer to his intellectuality that is not getting old with his body, which implies his resentment towards people who are “Caught in that sensual music all neglect (7)”. He resists against the idea that he is getting old and useless, but he has nowhere to escape except the artistic world of his imagination which can make him free of the boundaries of this limited world sentencing him

to a limited life. Therefore he desires to go to a place, "To the holy city of Byzantium" (16), which is free from the decay, elderliness, weakness of his mortal world. As an artist, he no longer feels that he truly fits into this material, imperfect, agonizing world, which is explained by Denis Donoghue:

The old man is changed into a poet and he knows his place; it is not on earth, in nature, but in the eternity of art. It makes little difference to the poem whether we feel Byzantium as an island of the blessed, a land of eternal youth, or the holy city of Romantic art, so long as we receive from it suggestions of permanence, perfection, and form". (Donoghue 62)

It is not important if Byzantium is the right place for the old to go in order to drink from the fountain of youth, but it symbolizes eternity, timelessness, beauty, wholeness for the poet. Both Keats and Yeats agree that they do not belong to this material world full of misery, sorrow, corruption and most importantly death, so they are in the pursuit of a magical trip that can fulfil their dreams through "the eternity of art". In the third stanza, he sincerely speaks to the "sages standing in God's holy fire" (17) to take him away from his world to "the artifice of eternity" (24) where he can live peacefully in accordance with everything belonging to this new world.

In the last stanza, he asserts he does not want his "bodily form from any natural thing" (26) while entering into this artistic world in which he needs to be "such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling" (27, 28). Like Keats, "Yeats also wishes to escape from the actualities of the biological world of process – birth, decay, and death – into the permanent world of art where he would assume the shape of a golden bird" (Khan 93). By taking the form of a golden bird, he becomes immortal, so he can sing to "lords and ladies of Byzantium" without limiting his time, which now seems very easy for him who does not belong to the natural world anymore whose limitations are invalid here.

Keats and Yeats use the bird image to express their feelings about life and death, the sufferings of this fading world, or more specifically their fading lives. They no longer want to be a part of this world. They have different ways of showing it: Keats desires to follow the immortal bird while it is getting far away from his world and Yeats makes sure that he wishes to be a golden bird by saving himself from “bodily form from any natural thing”(25-26). There is a huge difference between their ages when they wrote their poems: Keats was only 24 and Yeats was much older than him as he was 63. Though there is almost a century between these poems, it is clear that the worries of the poets are quiet similar to each other since they are both bothered by the mortality of their world. Despite the resemblances of the world they depict, Keats does not seem so sure about how to achieve to open its gates, whereas Yeats has already started sailing to Byzantium, his perfect, ephemeral world promising eternal youth for him. It may result from Keats’s being inexperienced and desperate because of facing the reality of death at such a young age, while Yeats is obviously used to “whatever is begotten, born, and dies. Their ideal world have some differences because “Keats’s sensitivity brings him to an immortal world of the nightingale, and Yeats’s intellect and reason allow him to enter the world of a golden bird in Byzantium (Xue, 25). While Keats’s sensitiveness is evidently felt in his poem, Yeats’s rationality is more dominant than his sensitiveness, which is caused by the age difference between the poets.

The birds in these two poems also have different symbols. Keats is inspired by the song of the immortal nightingale he thinks “wast not born for death” (61). However, when we look at the birds in the trees in Yeats’s poem, “Keats’s ‘immortal Bird’ (61) is mortal, but the artificial bird, an opposite of the natural, is indeed immortal. Yeats constructs a sharp contrast between his artificial immortal bird and Keats’s natural ‘immortal Bird” (Xue 26). We see two kinds of birds in

Yeats's poem: the birds in the first stanza are mortal ones that are "dying generations", but the golden bird in the last stanza symbolizes "artificial bird" with whom Yeats probably associates himself as he declares he does not want to get his "bodily form from any natural thing" (26). Yeats explains how he gets the idea of this "artificial bird": "I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang" (qtd. by Dume 405). Having been influenced by the charm of what he read in the past, Yeats apparently finds his solution to get away from his mortal, deteriorating world in being a golden artificial bird in Byzantium, but at the end of Keats's poem, the lack of certainty excites attention when the poet who realizes that the bird is flying away arouses a question about whether he is awake or in a sleep, which also resembles to the question of Edgar Allen Poe in the last lines of his poem "Is all that we see or seem / But a dream within a dream?" (23-24). Like Poe, who is asking if he is far away from reality with the words "a dream within a dream", Keats is not or does not want to be sure of reality because he does not want to be a part of the harsh reality of the world to which he unfortunately has to return after the nightingale leaves him.

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