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Connatural Vision, Varied Perception: A Comparative Study of John Keats's Ode To  
Nightingale And P.B. Shelley's Ode To A Skylark

Abstract

Keats and Shelley belong to the same age in the history on English Literature. Keats and Shelley share similar thoughts and imagination. The themes of Keats' and Shelley's poetry are romantic in nature. Keats is the greatest writer of odes. His odes fascinate the attention of the readers to a greater extent. The greatest quality of Keats' odes is their unity of expression. Shelley's odes include a climatic moment, an instant overwhelmed feel. His odes articulate an aesthetic philosophy through the metaphors of nature. Shelley treats natural objects as objects of supreme qualities. This paper attempts a comparative study of John Keats' Ode to Nightingale and Shelley's Ode to a Skylark. The natural object, that has instilled inspiration in to the minds of the poets, is the same but they hold a varied perception, which is evident in their odes. Both Keats and Shelley were interested in nature. Both the poets have awakened sensibilities to read beauty even in their minute details of nature. Keats and Shelley hold different conceptions of poetry. For Keats poetry is an artistic creation expressed in fine excess, for Shelley Poetry is a medium to express a message to mankind.

Keywords: Romantic, Aesthetic, Perception, Inspiration, Melancholy.

## Introduction

John Keats and P B Shelley were great contributors of English literature. Shelley and Keats were mutual friends. Their thoughts, imagination and creation were very much similar 'Ode to Nightingale' by Keats and 'To a Skylark' by Shelley is two masterpieces of English romantic poetry of the Romantic Revival. The natural object of inspiration in both odes is same. 'To a Skylark' is about the song of a Skylark. "Ode to Nightingale" is the about song of a nightingale. How both the poets perceive the song of the birds and in what way their views and thoughts differ is what the paper aims to explore.

## Features of an Ode

Getting to know the features of an Ode makes the comparative analysis easier. Ode is a Greek form of verse. Since it was a poetic composition written to be sung to the music of lyre, it is lyrical in character. In English, poetry Ode can be defined as a lyrical poem, which expresses exalted or enthusiastic emotion in respect of a theme, which is dignified and it does so in a metrical form which is a rule complex or irregular.

An Ode is a natural and spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. An Ode is written with the depth of poet's emotion and lyrical zeal. Ode is the poet's address to an abstract object. Ode is not about the abstract object it is the poet himself addressing the abstract object. The theme of the Ode is highly dignified, not only the theme but also the language and style are also elevated and highly dignified. The development of the poet's thought should be logically captured in the Ode. The ode reflects a study in the psychology of the human mind. The metrical pattern of the ode must be complex and elaborate but any meter regular or irregular can be incorporated.

## Comparative Analysis

Ode to Nightingale was written by John Keats in spring of 1819. Keats was inspired by the song of a Nightingale that had built its nest close to his friend's house in Hampstead. The Nightingale's song threw Keats in to a sort of tranquil pleasure. The theme of the poem is an aspiration to happiness and beauty of life far from the oppressing world. 'To a Skylark' was written in 1820 by P. B. Shelley. It is about the flight of a real Skylark. It is a lyrical poem in which Shelley embodies the simplicity, purity and sweetness of the bird's song in flight.

Keats' heart aches and his senses are dulled when he hears the song of the Nightingale. The aching pain and numbness are the outcome of excessive joy on hearing the Nightingale's song. Keats' senses seem overpowered with sleep and dullness as though he has drunk hemlock or some preparation of opium. Keats longs for a draught of Vintage Wine to leave behind all the woes of the world and join the Nightingale's world of happiness.

*“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 ....”*

In 'To a Skylark' Shelley addresses the Skylark as "Blithe spirit". He begins the poem praising the evening flight of the Skylark, then looks without success for examples of equivalent beauty and finally asks the bird to teach him its 'Sweet thoughts'.

*“Teach us, Sprite or Bird,  
What sweet thoughts are thine:  
I have never heard  
Praise of love or wine  
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine’*

Shelley remarks that no praise of love or wine can bring out an outburst of divine emotions like the song of the Skylark. While Keats requests for vintage wine to join the nightingale's world. Shelley clearly states that the Skylark's sweet melody is more powerful than love or wine in bringing out a poet's emotion.

In 'Ode to a Nightingale', Keats travels from his world of reality to the world of imagination. He proposes to leave the world of reality with a cup of wine. But he understands that wine is not potent enough to transport him in to the ideal region. He feels that only poetry can transport him to the Nightingale's world devoid of sufferings and sorrow. For a moment, Keats mistrusts his own power and the next moment he finds himself in the world of imagination beside the bird. This shows Keats' imaginative escape from the stern realities of his time in to the world of beauty. But Shelley had a fiery enthusiasm for humanity. Shelley wanted to play the role of a reformer. Shelley posed to be a messenger of continued faith and hope for a better future of mankind. 'To a Skylark' is not about a particular occasion or a particular bird but in fact it is a true search for something ideal in this world, something that cannot be captured in words. The Skylark is a symbol of happiness and true joy. It is not just a bird it unfolds the creative impulse of the poet. This brings out Shelley's quest for ideal love and ideal beauty. Keats did not search for the ideal for him a thing of beauty itself was joy forever. Keats was a true artist while Shelley an idealist.

Keats and Shelley are worshippers of Greek art and culture. In 'Ode to a Nightingale' Keats brings out various impressions from Greek mythology. Keats refers to the Lethe river in Greek mythology.

*“One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk”*

Keats wants to drink from the Lethe River and forget everything. Keats also refers to the Greek God of wine, Bacchus. Keats rejects the idea of travelling in a chariot of Bacchus to escape from the world

*‘Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards’*

Keats also refers to Dryad the wood nymph from Greek mythology in his poem. Keats desires a cup full of genuine, richly coloured wine that flows out of the fountain of Muses on Mount Helicon.

*‘Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene’*

Ode to Nightingale brings out various references from Greek mythology by Keats. This shows his immense love for Greek art and culture and how Greek art variably inspires Keats. The influence of Greek mythology in Shelley’s ‘To a Skylark’ is evident in these lines.

*“Chorus Hymeneal,  
Or triumphal chant,  
Match’s with thine would be all  
But an empty vaunt”*

Shelley compares the song of the Skylark to “Hymeneal” chorus, a poem or song for a wedding. Hymen is the Greek god of marriage.

In ‘Ode to Nightingale’ Keats draws references from the famous Biblical story of Ruth, who was sad and lonely. The Nightingale’s song brought consolation to her heart too.

*‘Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home’*

Shelley also uses the word “Heaven” to indicate the spiritual nature of the skylark.

*“That from Heaven, or near it,  
Poorest thy full heart”*

Though Christian spirituality is not the major focus of the poem, the place denotes where god lives with his holy angels. The connection can be further emphasized when Shelley has capitalized the word.

In 'Ode to a Nightingale' Keats transcends from the world of reality to the nightingale's world of imagination from the bright light of the day in to the tender night where the moon shines with her fairies, the stars. Keats regrets that there is darkness in his life.

*“And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;  
But here there is no light”*

The poem 'To a Skylark' is packed with unique descriptions of the skylark's song. Shelley compares the song of the skylark to abundant spontaneous art, to the rain of melody, cloud of fire and so on. Shelley also remarks in the ode that when the night was dark and lonely, it is the moon that shines her beams to make the lonely night lovely so is the song of the skylark.

*“As, when night is bare,  
From one lonely cloud  
The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd.*

In 'Ode to a Nightingale' Keats imagines a beautiful maiden in the palace tower listening to the nightingale's song. Shelley has a similar thought on listening to the Skylark's song. A high-born maiden in a palace tower listens to the sweet song of the Skylark.

*“Like a high-born maiden  
In a palace-tower  
Soothing her love-laden*

*soul in a secret hour”*

Both Keats and Shelley address the birds as ‘immortal bird’. Both Nightingale and Skylark that inspired the poets seem to be immortal beings. Shelley addresses the bird with reverence, the skylark is not just a bird but it is a divine ‘spirit’

*“Hail to thee, blithe spirit!”*

In both the odes the songs of the birds never seem to cease, both Shelley and Keats contrast the transitory of individual human life with the permanence of the bird’s song. The bird was not born to die. The voice of the bird has inspired and brought happiness since ages. Shelley and Keats represent the same fleeting experience in their odes.

*“Waking or asleep, - To a Skylark*

*Was it a vision, or a waking dream---Ode to a Nightingale”*

The songs of the birds have given the poets an intense imaginative experience in to the world of joy and beauty. There is a strong and distinct note of melancholy and pessimism in ‘To a Skylark’ by Shelley. The ode shows Shelley’s hatred against the ugliness, the injustice and the numerous evils of this world.

*“Yet if we could scorn*

*Hate and pride and fear”*

These lines bring out Shelley’s hatred for the injustice in the world.

*“Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.”*

This line brings out the melancholy on Shelley’s Ode. The depth of melancholy is even greater in Keats’ ‘Ode to Nightingale’. Keats’ melancholic touch is more deep and profound,

he cries of the weariness, the fever and the fret. Keats urge to escape from the world of misery is much evident in his ode.

*“I have been half in love with easeful death”*

These lines capture the poet's deep sense of disgust with life. He regards death more easeful than life.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the two odes brings out striking similarities of both the poets Keats and Shelley. The concept of inspiration in both the odes is the bird. How two great minds can think alike is the highlight of the comparative analysis. The object of inspiration, the touch of melancholy, the immortality of the bird, agonies of life, references from Greek mythology and Biblical references are the striking similarities in both the Odes. Nature's abundant beauty, the sun, the moon, the stars, the flowers, beautiful maidens are similar objects of comparison in the Odes. The 'Ode to a Nightingale' brings out Keats' intensive dissolving and transcending to the imaginary world. Shelley's Ode portrays Shelley as a prophet who wants to reform and preach the world the laws of life and death and the wisdom that the Skylark's song has imparted.

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