

Poems about the Bird

—A Comparative Study of *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Sailing to Byzantium*

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Abstract

Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats in 1819 and *Sailing to Byzantium* by W. B. Yeats in 1928 both employ the image of a bird to express the poets' longing for an ideal and immortal world. Yeats mirrors some tradition from Keats in writing the poem, but their disparate experiences construct varied descriptions about their ideal worlds. The nightingale, a natural bird, puts Keats in question—"do I wake or sleep" and delivers a tone of mournfulness; whereas the golden bird, an artificial object, guides Yeats through "what is past, or passing, or to come" and delivers a message of hope in the end.

Keywords: Keats, Yeats, reality, ideal, tradition

1. Introduction

The nightingale from the 19th century and the Byzantium's golden bird from the 20th century are two of the famous birds in the history of literature. Despite a time span of more than one hundred years, the two birds are considered as close kin. *Ode to a Nightingale* written by John Keats (1795-1821) in 1819 and *Sailing to Byzantium* written by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) in 1928 both use the image of a bird to share a theme about man's escape from the mundane world and a yearning for a spiritual world of immortality. The pursuit of art is the key to transcending the limit of physical being and reaching the ultimate eternity where the souls belong. However, the two poets' different personal backgrounds and inspirations result in divergent opinions on the nature of the bird and the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical worlds. This paper first analyzes the two poems respectively to provide a basis for comparison, and then traces the Romantic tradition that Yeats inherits from Keats, followed by a discussion about the differences that reflect the individual talents of both poets.

2. *Ode to a Nightingale*

Ode to a Nightingale explores the relationship between human beings and nature, and the mortality of the physical world and the eternity of the artistic world. It has eight stanzas in total. Each stanza is divided into two parts—first four lines and the subsequent six lines. The former adopts a rhyme scheme of a-b-a-b in accordance with the first quatrain in Shakespearean sonnet; and the latter uses a rhyme scheme of c-d-e-c-d-e matching the sestet in Petrarchan sonnet. The sestet acts as an explanation or an extension to the quatrain and creates a flow of continuity in each stanza.

Keats's poems often reveal an internal complexity constituted by self-division, which Stillinger (2001, p. 253) called "multiple Keats". The "multiple Keats" in *Ode to a Nightingale* stands for an unresolved imaginative dividedness between "the fanciful and the real, the high-flying and the down-to-earth, the sentimental and satiric" (Stillinger, 2001, p. 253). The two divided worlds, represented by a myriad of images throughout the poems, are related to each other by the nightingale's song.

The poem begins by marking a contrast of two images—the persona's aching heart and the happy melody. The persona is filled with a feeling that he is either poisoned by "hemlock" (2) or addicted to an "opiate" (3). Immediately afterwards, the persona realizes that the sick feeling is caused by "some melodious plot" (8). The persona becomes more cheerful than before because of the nightingale's joy—"being too happy" in the

“happiness” (6) of the nightingale. This initial stanza highlights a fusion of pain and pleasure. These very opening lines, according to Mathur (2010), are considered as paradoxical statements embodying a tension between reality and dreaminess.

In the second stanza, the persona follows the nightingale and comes to its world. “The draught of vintage” (11) is an instrument encouraging the persona to imagine an escape from reality. The ideal world is represented by several images in detail. The persona imagines being immersed in the “country green” (13), “tasting of Flora” (13) and hearing the “Provençal song” (14) surrounded by the “sunburnt mirth” (14), all of which will not happen in the persona’s world. The persona finds his contentment evoked by the song and embraces this imaginative land. He wishes to use death to “fade away into the forest dim” (20). He dreams to be taken away from the unbearable reality and placed close to the nightingale. Yet the persona’s awareness of the real world depicted in the third stanza relentlessly pulls him back from the imaginative world of bliss. The nightingale can never understand the persona’s suffering world replete with the “weariness, the fever, and the fret” (23), and such unawareness reinforces the gap between the persona and the bird. The four parallel lines beginning with “where” (25-29) is a further accusation of the desperate reality. The four lines, “where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs” (25), “where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (26), “where but to think is to be full of sorrow” (27), and “where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes” (29), emphasize the differences between the painful physical world and the pleasant ideal that is free from the depressions of everyday life. Stanza III serves as the antithesis of the nightingale’s joyful world illustrated in the preceding stanza II and the following stanza V.

The journey to the ideal begins in stanza IV, where the persona flies with his “wings of Poesy” (33) to accompany the nightingale. The journey continues, but the fact that “here there is no light” (38) in the nightingale’s world causes the persona to become “viewless” (33). Though losing his eyesight, his heart is still connected to the new world. He indulges himself in the nightingale’s world, experiencing the “the grass”, “the thicket”, “the fruit-tree wild”, the “hawthorn”, the “eglantine”, the “musk-rose”, and the “dewy wine” (45-49). This heavy texture of the images reveals passion and enjoyment. Stanza VI explains the reason for such pleasure. “Darkling I listen” (51) demonstrates that the reliance on the auditory stimuli due to the lost of eyesight makes it possible for the persona to concentrate on the song and to devote himself to the beauty of the fantasy. The happiness is also resulted from the persona’s “half in love” (52) with death. Personified as a human, the “easeful Death” (52) can take the persona “into the air” (54) and help him to “cease upon the midnight with no pain” (56) so that he can join the nightingale and the “ecstasy” (58).

The theme of death lays the foundation for the introduction of the immortality of the nightingale. The persona reaches his critical moment by directly referring to the nightingale as an “immortal Bird” (61) and realizes that he, belonging to the “hungry generations” (62), cannot achieve such immortality. A “bell” (71) is calling his return to reality. The persona does not belong to that “fancy” (74) world but has to face an evitable destruction. “Adieu! adieu!” (75), a contrast of the previous “Away! away!” (31), tells that the persona was immersing in fantasy created by the “deceiving elf” (74). He is left in confusion, between “whatever reality might be and what the fancy creates” (Scott, 2005, p. 140). A question closes the poem, “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music: —do I wake or sleep?” (79-80). This question is left unanswered, but the mournful tone is certain. Stated by Khan (2002), the poem charts the rise and fall of the persona’s imaginative power and inspiration. That “melodious” (8) music experienced in the beginning is fleeting, and the immortal world now closes its door to him. The persona becomes to understand the close connection between pain and pleasure, and the real and the ideal. Mathur (2010, p. 13) summarized the poem as a “hide-and-seek between reason and unreason, reality and imagination”. The persona is lost in the dream but he cannot hide in that dream forever. He is called to return to the actual world when he wakes up, and he has no choice but to accept the brutal truth. These closing lines offer an implicit portrayal of the underlying tension between reality and fantasy that is generated by the appealing song.

3. Sailing to Byzantium

Sailing to Byzantium is another poem concerning the conflict between the physical and the metaphysical, and the material and the spiritual. Frye (2009) noted that the poem placed a premium on the transitory nature of the physical world. The poem delivers a message to abandon the decay in the form of human body and to seek the permanence in the form of art. It has four stanzas, each containing eight lines with a rhyme scheme of a-b-a-b-a-b-a-b. Each stanza rhymes with every other line, constructing a clear structure of the poem.

The poem begins by stating the current situation in Ireland being “no country for old men” (1). “Old men” (1) suggests a preoccupation with old age in this poem. This country welcomes vitality and youth, whereas it rejects decay and death represented by “dying generations” (3). A comparison between the old and the young is

established. Despite the energetic life in youth, everything on earth, such as “salmon-falls”, “mackerel-crowded seas”, “fish”, “flesh”, “fowl” and humans, is destined to have a life cycle of “begotten, born, and dies” (4-6). The metaphor of “monuments of unageing intellect” (8) projects a contrast between the sensual world and the world of permanent intellect, or a work of art.

Stanza II shows the persona’s protest against the inroads of old age and the limit on life. The persona compares an old man to a “paltry thing” and “a tattered coat upon a stick” (9-10). He points out two alternatives facing the foreseeable tragic life of old men. One is to free the confinement of the body and to connect the body to its “soul” (11); the other is to study the “monuments of its own magnificence” (14) which suggest permanence. The persona initiates his journey in quest of eternity, a metaphorical voyage to Byzantium wherein the permanence of art that contrasts the aging of man belongs.

Stanza III begins with an exclamation “O” (17), an indication of a released and joyful atmosphere. The persona sees the sages “standing in God’s holy fire” (17) in a painting on the wall of the church. He wants the sages to be his soul’s “singing-masters” (20) and to take his aging heart. “Perme in a gyre” (19) refers to the spinning wheel constructing the structure of Yeats’s historical system. Yeats sees history composed of cycles of approximately two thousand years and each turning of a new age allows for a continuous process of human life (Franke, 1998, p. 28); in other words, the moment of death means the start of a new life. Asking the sages to walk out of the fire, spinning like a gyre and teaching the soul to sing imply a rebirth and union with the everlasting soul. With the masters’ guidance on his voyage to Byzantium, the persona wishes to be subsumed into Byzantine art, the “artifice of eternity” (24).

In the final stanza, the persona declares that in this world of art, he decides to extricate his soul “out of nature” and never to take his “bodily form from any natural thing” (25-26). Instead, the persona wishes to take the form of a golden bird, which is not a “natural thing”, to be set upon a “golden bough” in the Byzantine Empire to sing the “past, or passing, or to come” (26-32). The persona wishes to escape from the biological world of process—birth, decay, and death—but into the permanent world of art (Khan, 2002). Yeats prefers an intellectual permanence produced by art to the transience of life. Byzantium art, characterized as timelessness, is where the soul should be placed.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Tradition across Centuries

The two poems were written in distinct periods of time, but they share the same heritage to a certain extent. Yeats finished *Sailing to Byzantium* in the modern period, over one hundred years later than Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale* written in the Romantic era. Despite Yeats’s modernity, his poem can still fit into the tradition of English Romanticism. It can be seen that Yeats extensively employed imagination in the poem as much as Keats did. Damrosch et al. (2008) pointed out that imagination was a major criterion for a romantic poet. Both poets imagine withdrawing from the painful and fleeting reality while longing for an involvement in nature and immortality, another common Romantic theme.

Furthermore, a bond between the two poems is reflected in the lines. Addressing parallel images and themes can hardly be considered a coincidence. Yeats derived some literary tradition from Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*. On the surface, both poems have analogous phrases. A case in point is “dying generations” (3) in *Sailing to Byzantium*, and “hungry generations” (62) in *Ode to a Nightingale*. The “dying generations” (3) contrasts with the permanent Byzantium world; and the “hungry generations” (62) contrasts with the ecstatic nightingale world. It is seen that the contrast in Yeats’s poem echoes that in Keats’s, both focusing on the distinction between the tearful reality and the pleasant ideal. In addition, Yeats’s description of the life cycle as “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies” (6) is comparable to Keats’s “Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (26). Both poems demonstrate a sorrowful feeling about the inevitability of death in human life in these two lines. Each poem is also addressed to an emperor—“the voice I hear this passing night was heard/In ancient days by emperor and clown” (63-64) in *Ode to a Nightingale* and “to keep a drowsy Emperor awake” (29) in *Sailing to Byzantium*. The similar structures and phrases indicate that the two poems do not stand independent from each other.

When reading between the lines, both poems describe the thematic tension originated in the dichotomy between the immortal world and the transient realistic world. On the one hand, both poets aim to pursue a timeless world of beauty in art. They regard art as the tool for surpassing the restraint of time. Yeats discloses this wish by representing art as the “artifice of eternity” (24). Likewise, Keats wishes to use his “Poesy” wings to “fly to thee” (31-33). Keats uses his literature achievement to reach immortality as the nightingale uses its song. On the other hand, both poets want to bury their body in the realistic world. Yeats no longer wants to take his “bodily form” from “any natural thing” (25-26), fitting in beautifully with Keats’s “half in love with easeful Death” (52) and

“to cease upon the midnight with no pain” (56). They are aware of the unbreakable gap between reality and the fantasy, but they hope to use death as an approach to break off the restrictions of the body and let art pour forth the “soul abroad in such an ecstasy” (57).

Besides, the two poems both associate the world of eternity with an image of an everlasting bird. Yeats mentions his bird setting upon “a golden bough to sing” of the “past, or passing, or to come” (30-33) indicating the time without an end. Keats addresses the bird directly by exclaiming that “Thou was not born for death, immortal Bird!” (61). Mathur (2010) observed that the two great poets seemed to shake hands across a century portraying the bird as immortal, independent of biological life. These similarities present to readers that Yeats’s poem can trace the roots from Keats. T. S. Eliot once said that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (Damrosch et al., 2008, p. 1281). Yeats is a fitting example to this statement because he establishes a relationship between his poem and Keats’s. It appears that Keats’s poem affects Yeats profoundly and prompts Yeats to reimagine the experience of his predecessor.

4.2 Differences in Inspiration

The two poems have much in common, yet the poets’ disparate personal experiences also result in the distinct inspirations behind the poems, and the different focuses on their journeys to immortality. Keats was in great sorrow at the loss of his brother Tom who had died of tuberculosis when composing the poem (Stillinger, 2001). From a family with a history of tuberculosis, Keats was fully aware that he would follow Tom in the near future though he was only twenty-four at that time. This physical and emotional turmoil left Keats in despair, and put him in sharp contrast with a jovial singing when he was thinking under a tree (Crawford, 1922). The exultant happiness of the nightingale gave him a sense of tranquility, resulting in his rapid completion of the poem in one sitting (Crawford, 1922). The foreseeable brevity of his life—Keats died of tuberculosis at twenty-five—made him sensitive to the issue of life and death out of instinct. Keats was concerned about the life after death, so he made the description of the immortal world as his focus of the journey. He used many beautiful phrases such as “country green” (13), “violets” (47), and “fruit-free” (45) to portray that dream land. He emphasized the immediate and concrete sensations and emotions in his imagination. He paid great attention to the poetic beauty of his work, revealing a sense of aestheticism from within.

On the contrary, Yeats wrote his poem at the age of sixty-three. Living during a tumultuous time in Ireland, Yeats was actively involved in politics and social affairs, witnessing the political rise and fall of Charles Stuart Parnell, the Irish Revival, and the civil war (Campbell, 1955). Because Ireland failed to be independent, the social turbulence in Ireland remained for a long time, forcing Yeats to recall the past peaceful time to achieve consolation. Like a spiritual monologue, the poem can also be read as Yeats’s mind-changing process after the failure of his love for Maud Gonne (Damrosch et al., 2008). This weather-beaten man began to question what can be counted as immortality—political power, love, or art. He considered the rise and fall of social status fleeting, and the experience of embracing “the young in one another’s arms” (1-2) momentary. Yeats transferred his focus from society and life to the immortality of art. He not only assimilated the essence of Romanticism that was rich in sentiment and feeling, but also grew out of the mere pursuit of aesthetics and individual mindset by adding the profound wisdom from his philosophical perspective. He set the background of the poem in a broad context of society, history, and nation, which was a more complex view of the human experience (Beck, 2001). Yeats used “perne in a gyre” (19) to place the issue of immortality in his system of history. While both Yeats and Keats decried how the eternal world looked, Yeats went on to detail how to get to that eternal world and thus achieve an imperishable state. Some of the ways to reach the world include sailing to Byzantium, asking the sages to be soul masters, or studying individual’s magnificence.

In short, Keats’s doomed fatal illness at a young age works as an impetus for his creation, and arouses his sensitivity to life and death. The inspiration behind this poem is his family background and personal experience, a source from within. Yeats’s poem, on the contrary, contains the considerations of his old age, the turbulence in society, and the depression of a failed proposal of love. Set in a grand historical context, Yeats’s poem is a rational discussion of what immutability is and how it can be achieved with the help of the source from both within and without. In discussing the mortal and the immortal, Keats is an emotional poet looking forward to his life after death, whereas Yeats is a rational poet recollecting his path in society and history.

4.3 Differences in the Ideal World

The varied sources of their inspiration further lead to the differences of their imaginative worlds. 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. The different features of the two birds determine the fundamental

difference of the poets' opinions on the relationship between the physical and metaphysical world. In Keats's point of view, the bird is a natural object without any past—"what thou among the leaves has never known" (22). The song of the nightingale, transcending fate and time, is and always will be the same. Compared with all the creatures that have a life span, this natural bird sets an unbreakable wall between the physical and metaphysical world. Keats wishes to escape from his reality and enter this exclusively spiritual world symbolized by the nightingale's song. He is aware that the joy he feels from the song is temporary, and a feeling of detachment arises after he awakes in the conscious reality. Caught in a trap, he understands the necessity to wake up since the different nature of the two worlds will never allow reconciliation, but he cannot free himself from the "ecstasy" (58) in the dream world. The song of the nightingale offers Keats a release from the mortal reality, but it makes him much more poignant after realizing the indestructible gap between the two. He is destined only to dream of passionate joy and must be followed by a return to the actual world of death and disease—an ultimate hard reality of life (Khan, 2002). It is futile to escape from the inescapable. Mortal reality and the immortal art appear to be mutually exclusive, awakening the persona back to reality in the end. A sense of loss and a tone of desperation underlie the poem.

By contrast, the golden bird of Byzantium is an artificial symbol representing the "artifice of eternity" (24). For Yeats, the artificial symbol bears the merits of the everlastingness. Yeats alludes to the natural bird in Keats's poem in his opening stanza stating "birds in the trees—Those dying generations—at their song" (2-3). The singing "birds in the trees" (2) refers to the nightingale mentioned in Keats's poem. This line reflects that to Yeats, Keats's "immortal Bird" (6) 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" (61). Marthur (2010) explained that Yeats preferred a bird not of flesh and blood, but a product of someone's intellect. When compared to Keats's nightingale that has no past, the golden bird in the last stanza undergoes the "past", "passing", and "to come" (32), a process that is close to the human life cycle. Gold, the most lasting and steady metal among all the chemical elements, also addresses the permanent feature of the bird. The use of gold as the physical material implies an integration with the mortal and the immortal. The difference between the temporal and the eternal still exists, but the two sides can be reconciled through the image of the golden bird. The persona wants to let his soul take the embodiment of the golden bird that produces the lasting song in the same way as the imperishable art does. Art transcends life and death. The golden bird is an incarnation connecting the physical to the metaphysical, giving the ending a light of hope.

5. Conclusion

Yeats has clearly constructed a literary tradition connecting the two poems together by inheriting Romanticism from Keats. An analogy can be drawn between *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Sailing to Byzantium*. Both poems have portrayed an imaginative journey to eternity, to which the key lies in the creation of art. Represented by a natural bird and an artificial bird respectively, the world of art remains incompatible to Keats's physical world, but builds a connection to Yeats's reality. While Keats's experience with a tortured illness generates a mournful tone, Yeats's experience with the social involvement contrastly generates a poem integrating reality and imagination in the end.

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