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A Textual Analysis of “Ode to a Nightingale” and “To a Skylark”

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Abstract

One of the crucial features of Romantic poetry is love for nature. “Ode to a Nightingale” by Keats and “To a Skylark” by Shelley are the two excellent Romantic poems which treat the nightingale and the skylark as exceptional birds whose mellifluous songs imply the facets of immortality and spirituality respectively. This article aims at making a concise textual analysis of these two poems by engrossing the aspects like the speakers, structures of the poems, thematic dimensions, tones, literary devices, rhyme scheme and treatment of these birds. Some words and verse lines which are taken as qualitative primary data from these two odes have been analyzed as the elements and features of the texts.

Keywords: John Keats, Ode to a Nightingale, Percy Bysshe Shelley, To a Skylark

1. Introduction

John Keats (October 31, 1795–February 23, 1821) was born in London, England and passed away in Papal States, Italy. He is an influential English Romantic lyric poet who devoted his brief life to the excellence of a poetry marked by vivid imagery, great sensuous appeal, and a philosophy through classical legend (Hough, 2021) [7]. Keats (1819) [10] got “Ode to a Nightingale”, published in *Annals of the Fine Arts*. It is one of the most celebrated and widely read odes of John Keats. His other noted poems are “Ode to Psyche”, “Ode on Melancholy”, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “La Belle Dame sans Merci”, “The Eve of St. Agnes”, “Lamia”, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, “Bright Star”, and “To Autumn”.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (August 4, 1792–July 8, 1822) was born in Field Place, England and breathed his last breath in Tuscany, Italy. He is an English Romantic poet whose passionate search for personal love and social justice was gradually channeled from overt actions into poems (Reiman, 2021) [17]. Shelley (1820) had the ode “To a Skylark” published by Charles and James Collier in London. His other popular poems are “Ozymandias”, “Music, When Soft Voices Die”, “Stanzas Written in Dejection”, “Near Naples”, “Mont Blanc”, “The Flower that Smiles Today”, “Ode to the West Wind”, “The Mask of Anarchy”, “To the Moon” and “Adonais”.

One of the features of Romantic poetry is a melancholic tone. Death of his mother and his young brother Tom drove Keats gloomy and forlorn. His melancholy deepened when his lover Fanny Brownie deserted him after knowing that he was infected with tuberculosis. The death of the child Clara, his second wife Mary’s sequential depression, family crisis, ill health, his atheism, his radical political views, expulsion from a college at Oxford because of the pamphlet “Necessity of Atheism”, financial crisis and the lack of good relation with his father were the major bases of Shelley’s melancholy and despondency.

This article is prepared on the basis of qualitative analytical research in which the primary data are verse lines that are extracted from these poems and relevant books and journal articles provide the writer with the secondary data. The verse lines as qualitative data are analyzed by focusing on their textual aspects.

2. Theoretical Review of Literature

This article embraces the definition and concept of poetry, ode, and writers' views on these two odes.

2.1 Poetry and Ode

Poetry is a distinguished form of literature. It is an elucidation of life through imagination and feelings (Hudson, 2002) [8]. Reading a poem is a challenging task. Poems, time and again, challenge readers as well, asking them to interpret words, phrases, images, and symbols adjoined in striking ways (Pugh & Johnson, 2018) [15]. Ode is a form of poetry. The ode, which is of Greek origin, means a poem written to be recited to the accompaniment of music. It is a serious and dignified composition almost always in rhyme. It is longer than the lyric proper. It is often in the form of an address. It is a long lyric serious in subject, elevated in style and elaborate in stanzaic structure. It is a lyric poem, usually of some length. It can be taken as a full-dress poem (Cuddon, 1999) [3]. It is a single, unified strain of noble lyrical verse, focused on a single purpose, and dealing with one theme (Harmon, 2009) [5]. Ode is a specific poem. It retains the following crucial features: the dignified subject matter, the form of an address, leisurely slow-winding movement, over-elaboration and spacious planning, musicality and noticeable length. These two poems copiously conform these features.

2.2 Two Odes: Ode to a Nightingale and To a Skylark

Keats's colossal love for the song of a nightingale is overtly revealed in "Ode to a Nightingale". He feels very much thrilled and elated by the mesmerizing song of this bird. The sweetly and spontaneously patterned song of the bird lifts him up from the acreage of sorrows and pains to the cosmos of pleasures and reliefs, placing him in the state of forgetfulness. The sweet song of the nightingale is his prime symbol for the imaginative power that will take him on his journey (Wentersdorf, 1984) [23]. This ode appears to be the seamless piece of art which also symbolizes the pristine concept of beauty (Khan, Zehra, & Hafsa, 2014) [11]. "Ode to a Nightingale" is the most fervently humane and personal of all the great odes (Ikbal, 2020) [9]. It is his notable poem, famous for its ecological theme and spirit (Kong, 2019) [11]. It is firmly founded on Keats's overpowering passion for the imaginative world of the nightingale, where he pursues to escape and die a painless death (Sahoo, 2018) [18]. The poet desires to forget the world of sorrows and sufferings and aspires to run away from this world of trouble to the Nightingale which has never known the misery and the suffering of human beings (Verma, 2018) [22]. The principal stress of the poem "Ode to a Nightingale" is a scuffle between ideal and actual (Fogle, 1953) [4]. The conflict is central in this ode (Bush, 1960) [2]. Keats is one of the most influential Romantic poets. He is a pure poet (Kumar, 2014) [13]. Keats poetry creates a dreamlike deceptive world through which the reader not only momentarily escape from the frets of reality, but also experiences a moment that lifts the reader's mind to a higher level of serene mediation (Yi-Hsuan, 2011) [25]. "Ode to a Nightingale" presents the conflict between pain and joy, life and death, mortality and immortality, and, actuality and vision. This ode's gravity is enhanced with the employment of Roman and Greek mythological references such as Flora and Bacchus, Lethe wards, Dryad and the Hippocrene. Shelley's profound love and honor for a skylark is vividly articulated in "To a Skylark". This bird for him is much more than a mere bird. It is an unbodied joy. He looks up and hears

the soaring and singing skylark which does not experience the grief and pains of the world. The skylark is a symbol of the joyous spirit of the divine; it cannot be understood by ordinary, empirical methods (Britannica, 2017) [1]. It embodies both the purity and simplicity of nature (Shawa, 2015) [19]. The skylark for the poet is a feeling, an experience, a joy and a lesson (Rao, 2014) [16]. Shelley transforms ordinary experience into an appeal to move beyond that experience to a profounder poetic understanding (Hebron, 2014). Sorrow and suffering provide human beings with the aptitudes to create novel ideas. Keats recognizes that he still lives in the physical world of mortality and longing. This same tragic condition of human life produces great poetry as he did (Mambro, 2021) [14].

3. "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To a Skylark" under Analysis

Analysis is executed under the following headings

3.1 Genres

The titles "Ode to a Nightingale" by Keats and "To a Skylark" by Shelley suggest that they are odes as the genres of poetry. They are in the form of an address. Keats addresses a nightingale as a "light-winged Dryad" (line 7) and an "immortal Bird!" (line 61), whereas Shelley considers a skylark a "blithe Spirit!" (line 1), and a "Sprite or Bird" (line 61). They deal with the dignified subject matters of beauty, pleasure, sorrow, life and death. They are longer than a lyric proper.

3.2 The Speakers

The speakers of the odes are the poets who treat the birds with admiration and esteem. Keats presents the nightingale as an ancient bird whose song has been heard not only by the common folks, but also by "emperor and clown" (line 64; and undoubtedly it will be heard persistently in the days to come. Shelley presents the skylark, a small European bird which sings only while in flight, as a spiritual entity "Sprite" (line 61). It flies too high almost impossible to be visible to human eyes. The song of the skylark is divine because its song is not understandable by the (mortal) humans.

Both the odes are centered on nature in the form of birds. Keats in his "Ode to a Nightingale" reacts to the happiness brought to him by the song of the nightingale, and this seems to be a more contemplative poem. Shelley begins his poem with a direct address to the skylark, and it is the skylark's song that is of greatest interest to him. The speakers of both poems are deeply moved by the song of the birds, Keats by a nightingale, and Shelley by a skylark.

3.3 Tone

The tone of "Ode to a Nightingale" is melancholy and it reflects the speaker's strong desire to escape from the mortal world of sorrows and apprehension to the immortal world of poetic imagination "Away! away! for I will fly to thee" (line 31). This ode opens immediately with a somber tone. He was so enchanted by the song of a nightingale that he experienced as if he had had hemlock "My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk". (line 2). This melancholic tone ends in the meditative and philosophical one. He was preoccupied by the music and attributed it much meaning relating to death, life, and what comes after life on Earth. The tone of the Shelley's ode is a tone of wonder and joy as he venerates the bird for its ability to soar so high and to produce such natural art "Higher still and higher / From the earth thou springest"

(lines 6-7). The bird itself is described as being a pure joy—"unbodied joy whose race is just begun" (15). He desires to be taught by the bird "Teach us, Sprite or Bird, /What sweet thoughts are thine" (lines 61-62). Keats in his "Ode to a Nightingale" seems to be a more contemplative poem than that of Shelley.

3.4 Structure and Form

"Ode to a Nightingale" comprises eight stanzas, and each stanza has ten lines with the rhyme scheme of ABABCDECDE. Almost all the lines except the eighth are deca-syllabic "My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk" (line 2). The eighth line is hexasyllabic "In some melodious plot" (line 8). This ode is written in the iambic meter in general, but it lacks the regularity of metrical patterns. "To the Skylark" is composed of twenty-one stanzas. Each stanza consists of five lines, known as quintet. The rhyme scheme of each stanza is ABABB. The rhythmic pattern of this verse is trochaic trimeter in the first four lines Hail to thee, blithe Spirit! (line1) in a stanza while the last line is iambic hexameter "Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight" (line 20). Some verse lines in this ode are also irregular.

3.5 Setting

The setting of "To a Skylark" holds both the earth from where the speaker keeps listening to the song of the bird and the sky where the bird keeps flying and singing "That from Heaven, or near it, / Pourest thy full heart" (lines 3-4). The bird enjoys the sky "And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest" (line 10), but not the land "thou scorner of the ground!" (line 100).

The setting of "Ode to a Nightingale" is the garden. The poet was inspired by a nightingale whose nest was built near the house which he and his friend Brown shared in spring. One morning, Keats sat under a palm tree and wrote this ode when he heard beautiful singing of a nightingale "That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless" (lines 7-9). As the song of the nightingale fades away with reverberating the territory, his imagination leaves him in a flummoxed state.

3.6 Figures of Speech in the Odes

Figures of speech play an eminent role in making a text suggestive, lively, implicit and effective. Figure of speech is a retreat from the ordinary form of expression or the normal course of ideas in order to create a greater influence (Wren & Martin, 1981) [24]. Figures of speech are the literary devices that intensify the ideas and emotions in writing and speech. "Ode to a nightingale" employs alliteration, assonance imagery, apostrophe, personification, metaphor and anaphora as figures of speech. This ode involves sound devices like alliteration and assonance including the end rhyme. We can observe the repetition of the consonant sounds in verse lines such as /d / in "Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains" (line 3), /h / in "But being too happy in thine happiness" (line 6), /s / in "Singest of summer in full-throated ease" (line 10), "Dance, an Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!" (line 14), "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain" (line 59), "Perhaps the self-same song that found a path" (line 65) and "To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" (line 72); /b / and /w / in "With beaded bubbles winking at the brim" (line 17) and "Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown" (line 39); /f / in "And with thee fade away into the forest dim" (line 20) and "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" (line

23), "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet" (line 41) and "Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" (line 70); /m / "Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme," (line 53). Similarly, assonance can be noticed in the verse lines such as /e / in "My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk" (line 2); /i / in "Of beechen green, and shadows numberless" (line 9), "That I might drink, and leave the world unseen" (line 19), "I have been half in love with easeful Death" (line 52) and "Past the near meadows, over the still stream" (line 76); /eɪ / in "Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs" (line 25) and /ɪ / in "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?" (line 79). It contains plenty of imagery in the form of different terms "hemlock" (line 2), "opiate" (line 3), "Lethe-wards" (line 4) and "Tasting of Flora" (line 13) appeal to our both visual and gustatory images; "light-winged Dryad" (line7), "Hippocrene" (line16), "lustrous eyes" (line29). "Bacchus and his pards" (line 32), "starry Fays" (line 37), "flowers" (line 42), "embalmed darkness" (line 43), "perilous seas" (line 70) and "valley-glades" (line 78) appeal to our visual image; "melodious plot" (line 8), "murmurous haunt of flies" (line 50), "high requiem" (line60), "plaintive anthem" (line 75), and "music" (line 80) appeal to our auditory image; "hemlock" (line 2), "opiate" (line 3), "Cool'd" (line 12), and "Tasting of Flora" (line 13) are gustatory images; "soft incense hangs" (line 42) and "musk-rose" (line 49) are olfactory images; "sunburnt mirth!" (line 14), "warm South" (line 15) and "the air" (line 54) appeal to our tactile images (line 54); and "immortal Bird!" (line 61) is an abstract image. Depiction of natural images is resilient evidence that marks Keats a genuine Romantic poet. This ode uses apostrophe that is use of addressing something as if it is present or absent. "That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees" (line7), "Darkling I listen; and, for many a time" (line 51), and "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" (line 61) are the instances of apostrophe. We can perceive the use of personification in the third stanza when a non-human thing nightingale is given some human qualities. "Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes" (line 29), and "The Queen moon is on her throne" (line 36) are the two perfect examples of personification in the ode. Metaphor is a sort of implicit comparison between two entities. Poetry is compared with a bird "the viewless wings of Poesy" (line 33). Warm south and beaker are compared "a beaker full of the warm South" (line 15) and fancy is compared with deceiving elf "Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well /As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf" (lines 73-74). Anaphora is employed for the sentences that use the same initial word or phrase in a sequence. The word "Where" is repeatedly used in the ode "Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies; / Where but to think is to be full of sorrow" (lines 25-27); and Adieu in "Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well /Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades" (lines 73, 75).

"To a Skylark" employs an ample number of figures of speech: assonance, alliteration, simile, symbol, imagery, rhetorical devices, anaphora and so on. Assonance involves the same vowel repetition in a verse line. There is a repetition of /ɪ / in "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!" (line 1), and "Singing hymns unbidden" (line 38), /aɪ / in "Like a high-born maiden" (line 41), /æʊ / in "Like a glow-worm golden" (line 46), /i:/ in "In its own green leaves" (line 52), and /e / in "Better than all measures" (line 96), "Better than all treasures" (line 98). Alliteration refers to the reiteration of a consonant sound at the beginning of words in the verse line. We can see the

repletion of / s / in “And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest” (line 10), “Of that silver sphere” (line 22), “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought” (line 90), and “Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!” (line 100), /p/ in “ The pale purple even ” (line 16), / w/ in “By warm winds deflower'd” (line 53), / m / in “ Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves ” (line 55), / l / in “ Thou lovest: but ne'er knew love's sad satiety” (line 80), and “The world should listen then, as I am listening now” (line 105), / d / in “Thou of death must deem ” (line 82), and / f / in “From my lips would flow” (line 104).

Imagery is one of the most recurrently crafted literary devices. This ode embraces the images like “blithe Spirit!” (line1), “Heaven” (line 3), “unpremeditated art ” (line 5) and “ an unbodied joy ” (line 15) are abstract images; “ a cloud of fire ” (line 8), “the golden lightning ” (line 11), “ the sunken sun ” (line 12), “rainbow ” (line 33), “ flowers and grass ” (line 50), “a rose / green leaves ” (lines 51-52), “the twinkling grass, /Rain-awaken'd flowers ” (lines 57-58), “the fountains ” (line71), “What fields, or waves, or mountains? / What shapes of sky or plain?” (lines 73-74), and “ a crystal stream ” (line 85) appeal to our visual image; “And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest ” (line 10), “ voice is loud” (line 27), “melody ” (line 35), “Singing hymns ” (line 38), “thy music doth surpass” (line 60), “Chorus Hymeneal, Or triumphal chant ” (lines 66-67), “thy notes flow ” (line 85) and “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought ” (line 90) are auditory images.

Simile is a figure of speech used to compare a person or an object with something else to make the meanings clear to the readers using syntactic lexemes “like” or “as”. The simile employed in this ode is used to compare the skylark with different entities such as “Like a cloud of fire ” (line 8), “Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun ” (line 15), “Like a star of Heaven ” (line 18), “Like a Poet hidden” (line 36), “Like a high-born maiden” (line 41). “Like a glow-worm golden” (line 46) and “Like a rose embower'd” (line 51). It reminds us of an epic simile of John Milton.

Symbolism signifies the use of symbols. A key symbol used in this ode is the skylark that symbolizes wonder, joy, and happiness. It is suggested by the verse lines “Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!” (line 1), “I hear thy shrill delight” (line 20), “Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass” (line 60) and “Of thy happy strain?” (line 73), and a nightingale that stands for immortality and pleasure.

Rhetorical question is such a question that is not asked to receive an answer, but it is just deployed to make the point clear. Shelley has posed questions rhetorically to emphasize his point. “What thou art we know not; / What is most like thee?” (lines 31-32), “What fields, or waves, or mountains? /What shapes of sky or plain? / What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?” (lines 73-75) and “Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?” (line 85).

3.7 Themes

“Ode to a Nightingale” is a romantic ode which fundamentally takes the singing bird nightingale as a superb form of nature. It deals with the themes like mortality “Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (lines 25-26), impermanence, “Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades / Past the near meadows, over the still stream” lines 75-76), human suffering “The weariness, the fever, and the fret / Here, where men sit and hear each other groan” (lines 23-24),

intoxication “My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk /Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains / One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk” (lines 2-4), poetic imagination “the viewless wings of Poesy” (line 33), escapism “And with thee fade away into the forest dim:/ Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget” (lines 20-21) and “Away! away! for I will fly to thee” (line 31), and nature “ Of beechen green ” (line 9), “the Queen-Moon ” (line 36), “ The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;/ White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine ” (line 45-46), perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn ” (line 70), “ Past the near meadows, over the still stream ” (line 76) and “ In the next valley-glades ” (line 78).

“To a Skylark” is a lyrical ode that treats a skylark as a cheerful spirit and a form of nature. It deals with the major themes of human condition “We look before and after, /And pine for what is not: / Our sincerest laughter/ With some pain is fraught; / Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought” (lines 86-90), supremacy of bird song “Sound of vernal showers /On the twinkling grass, / Rain-awaken'd flowers,/ All that ever was / Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass” (lines 56-60), Desire for learning “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” (lines 61-65), inspiration to progress “Higher still and higher/From the earth thou springest/ Like a cloud of fire; / The blue deep thou wingest,/ And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest” (lines 6-10). This ode tells us that nature is capable of inspiring, delighting and teaching the human beings.

4. Conclusion

“Ode to a Nightingale” by Keats and “To a Skylark” by Shelley exquisitely revere these birds as an immortal being and a blithe spirit respectively. Keats in the “Ode to a Nightingale” is in a melancholic mood, whereas Shelley in the “To a Skylark” is in a cheerful and wonderful mood. Keats’ expressions are more philosophical than those of Shelley. Shelley’s articulations are more pleasing than those of Keats. Keats’ ode sounds more meditative than that of Shelley. Both the odes execute an ample number of figures of speech to suggest their meanings. The figurative language used in both odes glorifies these birds superbly. Both the odes present these two birds as specific and unique beings with an influential artistic aptitude of singing and enjoying in nature. They are much jollier and more gratified than humans. They have been unailing sources of inspiration and gratification for human beings. A common theme of these odes is nature. The persons who are interested in studying literature will undoubtedly be benefitted from this article.

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