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Bird Imagery in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" A Comparative Study

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Images of Birds in Literature

The images of birds are quite common in literature since medieval period. According to Beryl Rowland, author of *Birds with Human Soul*, birds represent the immortal soul. Discussing the general pattern of bird symbolism in literature she remarks: "The idea that the bird represented the soul as opposed to the body, the spiritual in contrast to the earthly, seems to have been universal"¹. They have been used as symbol of new life and procreation in literature. In medieval art birds are often shown as inhabitants of paradise or the garden of earthly delights. There are numerous descriptions of Christ clutching a bird in his hand or holding a bird, both suggesting the idea of soul incarnated in body.

Providing Deeper Meaning

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Reference to a particular bird in literature may give a deeper meaning to a text. For example, Chaucer characterises his Squire through the nightingale, which in his ‘The General Prologue’ to *The Canterbury Tales* becomes a traditional symbol for lust and sexual love:

So hooted he lovede that by nyghtertale.
He sleep namore than doth a nyghtyngale.²

Bird imagery further plays an important role in the development of Chaucer’s themes in his long poem ‘Troilus and Criseyde’.

Birds as Central Motifs

Birds as central motifs have engendered a rich literature in the history of world culture. In literature we move from classical and medieval satires like Aesop’s Fables, Aristophanes ‘Birds’, Chaucer’s ‘Parliament of Fowls’ to western poems like Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, Shelley’s ‘To a Skylark’ and Poe’s ominous ‘Raven’. Classical authors having a fascination for birds include Homer, Plautus, Juvenal, Virgil, Pindar, while medieval and Renaissance authors include Dante, Donne, Marvell, Milton, More and Shakespeare. Modern writers interested in birds are more numerous including Baudelaire, Chekhov, Eliot, Tennyson, Whitman, Thoreau and Melville.

As far as Romantic poetry is concerned there are plenty of bird images in it. Here birds have been imagined as creatures close to spiritual perfection. Their gifts of flight and song have been used as metaphorical examinations of the poet’s dreams and desires.

The Nightingale

The nightingale is an important symbol for poets from variety of ages and has a number of symbolic connotations. The nightingale has also been used as a symbol of poet’s imagination and his poetic art. Poets choose nightingale as a symbol because of its creative and spontaneous song. Coleridge and Wordsworth saw the nightingale more as an instance of natural poetic creation; the nightingale became voice of nature in their poetry. John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” pictures the nightingale as an idealised poet who has achieved the height of creativity that Keats longs for. Involving a similar conception of nightingale Shelley

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wrote in his 'Defense of Poetry': "A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sound."³

The Focus of This Paper: A Comparison of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' and Yeats's The Wide Swans at Coole

This paper aims to attempt a comparative study of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and W.B Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" in the light of their treatment of bird images of the nightingale and the swans respectively.

Keats and His Nightingale

Like many of the greatest Romantic odes, Keats's poem explores the nature and limits of artistic creation, setting the suffering of mankind against the immortality of the bird's song. In "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats is concerned intellectually with the inexorable efforts of passage of time on beauty and human love. What Keats wishes is to reach out to a world in which beauty and love are not subject to change. His prime symbol for the imaginative power that will take him on this journey is the nightingale or, more specifically, its song.

The first time the word *nightingale* appears is in the title of Keats's poem but the nightingale with its rich, intoxicating dark world ("embalmed darkness") and melodious song is at the centre of the poem. As Keats imagines it, this bird lives in its own reality in the dark, shady, intertwined trees in an enchanting forest. The nightingale has important connection with mythology. But the most important thing to keep in mind is that it represents a kind of carefree existence that is untouched by burdens of transience of human life, fear of unavoidable death and painful perpetuation of incurable disease which haunted Keats mind throughout his life.

Blissful Music Symbolizing Spontaneity, Liberty and Ecstasy

What the poem highlights is the blissful music of the nightingale which symbolises spontaneity, liberty and ecstasy:

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

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Of beechan green, and shadows numberless,
Singing of summer in full-throated ease⁴

Flying Away from the Realities of the Material World

The poet so desperately wants to enter the world of the immortal bird because of his inability to bear the harsh realities of the material world:

Here where men sit and hear each other groan;
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 sorrow⁵

Pursuing and Seeking Immortality

In fact, this immortality is not in the bird itself but in the song which had been heard since long. Keats decides to gain the character of immortality by writing poetry, which will stay forever. The other conflicts are between truth and imagination, pain and joy which the poet wants to escape from.

The poem gives an insight into the fears and concerns that plague Keats. One can feel Keats's desperation as he yearns for the nightingale which represents a world devoid of the weariness and turmoil of this terra firma. With the recent death of his brother and the apprehension that he would also die the same death, Keats's desire to escape into the perfect and unchangeable world of nightingale is not surprising. The nightingale represents beauty of nature, ecstasy of eternity and perfection of artistic creation. However, even though listening to the song of the bird Keats leaves his worries behind for a few minutes, but again he is forced to return to the world of misery and worries ("To toll me back from thee to my sole self").

The new critics, especially Cleanth Brooks, see a paradox in the poem: "The world of imagination offers a release from the painful world of actuality, yet at the same time it renders the world of actuality more painful by contrast."⁶ No doubt, the contrast prevails in

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the poem as the song of the nightingale which activates the poet's imagination and sharpens his desire to enter the world of art in the beginning is transformed into a mass for the dead: "To thy high requiem become a sod". The poem is a serious attempt by Keats at discovering immortality in the struggle between joys and sorrows that we have continuously to wage as long as we are alive.

The Wild Swans at Coole

Another poem dealing with the aging process is Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole". It is a deeply personal poem that explores the cycle of life through nature. The poet draws a parallel between the autumn and his own growing years. Swans are usually depicted in mythology as pairs, symbolising love and monogamous relationships as well as loyalty and trust in partnership. The poem recounts the poet's trip to the lake at Augusta Gregory's Coole Park residence. The gap of nineteen years between the first and the second visit to the lake has changed a lot ("All is changed utterly") because of the First World War and the Irish Civil War.

Ageing, Nostalgia and Melancholy

Yeats wrote this poem when he was fifty two years old in 1917. Thus the tone of the poem is that of nostalgia and melancholy. There are nine and fifty swans in the poem. They represent love, grace, beauty and sincerity. Their youthful energy and "companionable" stage makes the poet nostalgic as he has grown old whereas "their hearts have not grown old". They are still "mysterious and beautiful" and governed by "passion or conquest" as they did nineteen years ago when the poet first saw them. Their graceful movement in pairs on the water and then the air is so romantic because youth is associated with the time of falling in love, of carefree movement and energetic action.

The long period of nineteen years has changed a lot in the poet's life, he is nineteen years older, perhaps nineteen years sadder ("And now my heart is sore"). Although years go by, men grow older, the swans remain young, they are still unwearied, and their hearts do not grow old:

Unwearied still, lover by lover

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They paddle in the cold
They have not grown old⁷

Immortality

Yeats knows that some day he will die but the swans would live on. The Swans for Yeats like the nightingale for Keats are ‘immortal’. The swans definitely symbolise youth, passion and energy. In “The Wild Swans at Coole” the swans “symbolise the perfect intensity of youth act in the changeless of their pattern, which preserves youth in the artifice of eternity.”⁸

The last two stanzas describe the swans as ‘unwearied’, ‘mysterious’ and ‘beautiful’. They don’t change with time. Nineteen years have made Yeats old, sad, melancholic but the swans are untouched by the callous ravages of time. Keats’s “Nightingale” written almost a hundred years ago also celebrated the immortality of the bird nightingale:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and crown⁹

Changing and Changeless Mystery

Even if the swans die, the old swans are replaced by younger ones, so swans are both changing and changeless. Similarly Keats is not talking about one nightingale whose song he listened to but about the whole generation of nightingales. As Yeats wonders whose eyes will the swans delight when he wakes up to find that they have ‘flown away’, Keats’s ode also ends with the poet’s wondering “Do I wake or sleep?,” that is, is reality the ecstatic world of the nightingale’s song, or the everyday world he has ‘awakened’ to. As “fancy cannot cheat so well”, similarly the swans also seem to be illusionary to Yeats at the end of the poem.

Though in both poems we find that the poets are speaking about the immortality of the birds-- their carefree life and happiness and the beauty of their liberty-- it is interesting to note the difference in the attitudes of the poets.

Exploration of Conflicting Dualities

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Keats major concern is perception of the conflicted nature of human life, i.e., the interconnection of mixture of joy and sorrow, intensity of feeling and numbness, life and death, mortal and immortal, the actual and the ideal, the separation and the connection. The one bird which the poet is listening to represents the species, which by continuing generation after generation does achieve a kind of immortality as a species. Yeats also explores conflicting dualities, often counterbalancing the ideal and the real mortality of self and immortality of the swans.

While Keats is speaking about the suffering and misery of humanity in general, although some experience of personal pain caused by his brother's death lurks in the background, in Yeats's case the note is more or less personal. Throughout the poem "The Wild Swans at Coole", we can feel that the poet creates a mood of sadness because he has finally lost his love. Maud Gonne, the Irish revolutionary and actress, whom Yeats loved all his life, has rejected his love. In the background of this lament lies Yeats's frustration in love for Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult Gonne. He refers to the fickleness and unreliability of the human relationships in comparison to lifelong commitment of the swans. That is why he has selected odd number of swans, i.e., fifty nine to highlight his loneliness and misery. He numbers the swans 'nine and fifty' to describe that one is without companion, or maybe has lost or looking for its companion.

Loneliness

The loneliness of desertion is again seen in the last line of the poem "I awake some day to find that they have flown away". Moreover, Keats finds the nightingale's song so enchanting and mesmerising that he wants to die ("To cease upon the midnight with no pain") and finally get rid of pains and sufferings of this material world whereas there is no such longing on the part of Yeats, in fact, he does not wish to age and die. Further, throughout Keats's ode (as the references to Hemlock, Lethe, Bacchus and his leopards, embalmed darkness etc. point to) there is an escapist's tendency to shut his eyes to harsh realities, in Yeats's poem no such tendency can be seen on the part of the poet, although the bitterness and disillusionment caused by the rejection and unfulfillment in love makes him envy the 'companionable' nature of the swans. Whereas Keats is more fascinated by the

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invisible bird's singing magic that almost intoxicates him into a desire to die an easy death, for Yeats the graceful and the unrestricted movement of the swans on the still water of the lake and in the sky is enchanting.

No doubt Keats's ode presents conflicts between idealism and scepticism similar to the Yeatsian ones in "The Wild Swans at Coole". But the disappearance of the swans from the sight of Yeats seems to signal a loss of his creative powers and in Keats's ode the nightingale's fading song ("Fled is that music") signals the break of Keats spell of imagination ("fancy cannot cheat us so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf"). In overall appeal and effect Keats's ode has an upper hand over Yeats's poem as it appeals to the senses of hearing, smell and sight and usually to more than one sense at a time.

Differences in Form

As far as form is concerned, there is difference in that too. "The Ode to a Nightingale" like any other ode is written in ten line stanzas. The first seven and last two lines of each stanza are written in iambic pentameter, the eight line of each stanza is written in trimeter, with only three accented syllable instead of five. Each stanza in 'Nightingale' is rhymed ababcbdecde whereas "The Wild Swans at Coole" has the structure of five stanzas, each consisting of six lines.

The rhyme scheme of each stanza is the same and is a-b-c-b-d-d and the metre is iambic. The rhythm is not regular and is a method used to draw an analogy with crying voice. This type of stanza perfectly suits the mood of the poem and makes it heartfelt. The last two lines are most melodic part of each stanza, especially the last ones:

Delight men's eyes, when I awake someday
To find they have flown away ¹⁰

This reflects the fear of the person to lose the last remainder of his youth.

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