

## John Keats and Robert Frost – The Romanticists *sans* Escapism

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:9 September 2013  
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### Aspects of Comparative Literature

Comparative literature is not merely a literary comparison, rather it has now carved its own niche as a separate branch of literary history. It is even recognized as the study of international relationships because the very future of human life on this earth solely rests on the rock basis of international understanding. Moreover, Man intends to compare anything and everything under the sun for he knows that comparison is the very essence of life without which the life of mankind on earth would become further complicated and impossible. And it may look incredible first when both John Keats and Robert Frost are portrayed as **Romanticists sans Escapism**. But a careful reading of John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* and Frost's *Birches* could yield only the pivotal theme of romanticism, not escapism.

### John Keats



Courtesy: [www.en.eikipedia.org](http://www.en.eikipedia.org)

The year 1816 is remarkable for one, who otherwise would have become a surgeon and the world would have been an unfortunate one to miss a great poet. It was none other than John Keats whose life as a poet though lasted for three years, has proved to be as great in the field of

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literature as William Shakespeare. As Mathew Arnold puts it, 'He is; he is with Shakespeare.' John Keats who was the son of the livery-stable keeper in London is considered to be the last born of the Romantics and the first one to die. As William Wordsworth is known as the poet of nature, John Keats is known as the poet of beauty. He himself has accepted that "I find I cannot exist without poetry – without eternal poetry – I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan.... With a great poet, the sense of beauty overcomes every consideration, or rather obliterates all considerations".

### **A Romantic Poet**

John Keats, as a Romantic poet, is many sided, for there is a rarest of the rare blend of many aspects of romantic poetry. One can find that his poems are a highly wrought and high-spirited in nature with the aim to recreate poetic medieval past and an expression of an emotional and spiritual anxiety of nature as well. Yet, he was not in any way pressed or influenced by the political and social questions of the day like the other romantics got themselves involved in the same. But John Keats, the notary of the Romantic imagination, feels enraptured the moment he listens to the song bird and feels that beauty and love, as an embodiment of art, are imperishable having perpetual spring time freshness. One can also feel that the poet has been earnestly longing for such state of life though he knows its impossibility in reality.

### ***Ode to a Nightingale***

In the poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, the song of the nightingale makes the poet feel disoriented from listening to it. He experiences as having drunk something really very strong as he begins to forget the things around and this painful world as well. The immediate reaction that he experiences is his bittersweet happiness at the thought of the song of the nightingale which, according to him, is spirit of joy incarnate. To join in the world of this immortal nightingale, the poet wishes to have had special wine distilled directly from the earth. But finally Keats, wearing the poetic mantle, soars on the wings of imagination, the viewless wings of poesy and identifies himself being present already there. He says:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:  
Already with thee! (lines 31–35)

Being in the nocturnal world of the nightingale which is deep and “verdurous gloom”; where any moonlight can scarcely reach to, smells, in the embalmed darkness, the presence of fragrant flowers and plants at his feet though he could not see them. As Keats’s personal and domestic life was none too happy and as it was well known that he was often half in love with death, thinks, it wouldn’t be so bad to die at midnight in the forest with no one around except the nightingale singing. The poet feels:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy! (lines 55-58)

### **Contrast between Nightingale and Human Beings**

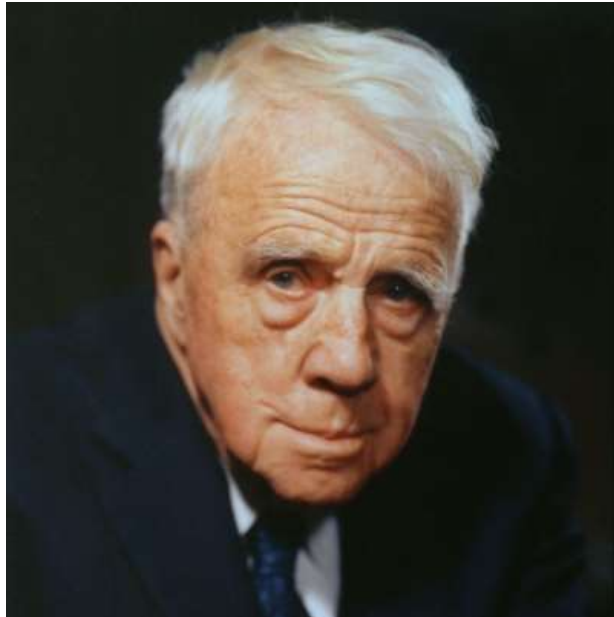
But the poet draws a contrast between the world of nightingale and human beings, stating that the bird must be immortal since it has been, by its notes, enchanting people through generations together from clown and emperors to Biblical characters and common people in fantasy stories. The beautiful vision, which the poet has been experiencing, is interrupted as the nightingale flies away and leaves the poet “forlorn”. The poet himself puts:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. (lines 71-74)

Keats feels deserted and disappointed that his imagination which is famed to be a deceiving elf could not detain him for long in its world but is brought back to the world of reality.

It is to be noted that the human beings generally desire for certain unalterable states of life. They are ‘happiness without sorrow’, ‘life without death’, ‘health without sickness’. According to Keats, the poet, that these states of life are possible only in the world of imagination that too as long as one’s sense of imagination helps and Keats, at human level, is painfully aware of and suffers from the weariness, the fever and fret. He seems to accept the world of reality and comes back to it at last, though felt temporarily escaped to the world of unshattered permanent joy.

### **Robert Frost**



Courtesy: [www.biography.com](http://www.biography.com)

Robert Frost besides being known as the American romanticist is perhaps the best loved of all American Poets. It is so, because his poetic themes are nothing but familiar and ordinary things. Still the simplicity in his poems is found only on the surface, for they convey the ideas and thoughts that are deep and implied. According to him, “a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.”

### ***Birches***

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In the poem *Birches* originally called as *Swinging Birches* Robert Frost, is seen more as romanticist and not an escapist. The kaleidoscopic portrayal of fifty feet tall birches trees with a thin sheet of ice and snow covering the slender and soft trunks before and during the day break is to substantiate the point that he is, besides being an American romantic, also drives us home with a valid message that “Earth’s the right place for love”.

### **Tree and Country Girl**

The narrator in the poem, who is walking through the woods, looks at the top of the tree line. On seeing some of the trees, “across the lines of straighter darker ones”, swaying from left to right and from earth up to Heaven, he starts to imagine of several things about the trees. He thinks about how heavy ice and snow formed as a sheet, covering the trunk during cold winter night; bend the thin trees to the ground. And also he compares its regaining to its original position due to the warm sun light with a country girl who bends her head on her hands and knees to dry her hair. This gets him imagining a boy climbing meticulously to the top of trees and bending them down until he can let it go and land safely to the ground. He recollects doing this when he was a kid in the past and bygone years. He writes:

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,  
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
But dipped its top and set me down again.  
That would be good both going and coming back (lines54-58)

### **Trapped in Adult life**

The poet, when felt trapped in his adult life with considerations, wishes that he could be boy again and climb up trees to escape temporarily. At the same time he realizes that he should come back to earth for the adult life with such responsibilities is enjoyable and unavoidable. This memory makes him feel that life is not a trap instead it is a right place to love and live.

### **Similarities between John Keats and Robert Frost**

It is to be noted that both of them are well known as the poets of nature and love. They take a simple and domestic event as a theme for their poem and succeed in conveying a message

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to the word with the same, towards the end of the poem convincingly. John Keats, on listening to the song bird, is carried away by the song of the bird nightingale and says:

'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness,—

The poet highlights on a point that he is not envious of the bird's happiness and is free from jealous of any kind as it seems that he wants to leave a message that when joy is shared it is multiplied and sorrow when shared is greatly reduced. Also he feels that the musical note of the bird has become the best healer for his sorrow-ridden and depressed soul.

Similarly Robert Frost is seen inspired by his childhood experience, with swinging on birches which has been a popular entertainment for the child (may be a cowherd) in the villages. Most of the other games like baseball are unknown to him except the one he invents himself. Frost says:

Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,  
Whose only play was what he found himself,  
Summer or winter, and could play alone.

The poet in the same poem goes on to say that the act of swinging on the birches is portrayed as a means to escape from the hard and difficult realities of adult life temporarily. He feels so, because the act of climbing the tree to the maximum height is like one's journey towards heaven or to a place where his imagination can be free. However, it is the unavoidable fact of the life that one can't shun one's adult responsibilities and dwell in the carefree world or world of imagination instead; he has to start fresh on the earth like a swinger who is grounded in the earth through the roots of the tree for the earth is always right place for love.

Similarly, John Keats whose personal and domestic life was none too happy always wanted to fly away to a world where he could experience nothing but perfect joy and love; and beauty could survive eternally. He, as a poet, chooses the wings of his own poetry assisted by imagination but only for a short sojourn. Soon he gets sucked back into the normal world and

realizes that imagination, though able to create new world, a permanent escape from the world of reality is not feasible.

And it is to be noted that both these poets are romanticists and not the escapists though wanted to get away from this world of sorrow at the beginning, they come back to the world of reality with its pros and cons as it seems that these two have understood the meaning of human life in this world.

### **A Gulf of Differences between Them**

Ruminating on above discussion, it is to be noted that these two poets, though sound to be similar in their views and opinion alike, there is a gulf of differences between them. They are neither contemporaries nor from the same country. Keats is an English man while Frost is an American. Thus it is found and to be admitted that John Keats and Robert Frost look at the life through the same window and think eventually alike.

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