

The Immortal Imagination in Keats's  
"To Autumn" and "Ode to a Nightingale"

John Keats is one of the most well known romantic poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an early death barring him from an even more celebrated career. His approach to the genre of Romanticism is unique in that he avoids any discussion of faith in the divine, rather seeking paradise through the union between humans and the natural world. Keats does not believe in earthly nor divine paradise, but achieves this 'heavenly' ideal many Romantic writers explore through the celebration of artistic expression. Keats expresses this sentiment in a letter titled "On the Imagination and 'a Life of Sensations rather than Thoughts'". He writes, "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth." Keats believes the imagination, which fuels creative expression, to be the most direct access to truth. A "life of sensations rather than of thoughts" is one that Keats' sees to be most conducive to the life of an artist, who seeks to understand the world through his poetry. Keats uses his writing to grapple with the weight of reality and the undesirable aspects of existence, this poetic technique described by Andrew J. Kappel in his paper "The Immortality of the Natural: Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'" as an "an experiential escape from death." (283) Keats addresses existential anxieties in his poems "To Autumn" and "Ode to a Nightingale", using the natural world as a mediator to explore themes of mortality and preservation. "To Autumn" is an ode that centers the aesthetics of nostalgia, depicting a speaker who chooses to celebrate a season of change as a key stage in the rejuvenation of the natural world. "Ode to a Nightingale" is narrated by a speaker who seeks to escape the struggles of a mundane reality, literalizing this feat through inebriation and envisioning themselves embarking on an imaginative, mythic journey. Within these two

poems, Keats' creation of spatial and temporal setting, representation of subject-object unity and intertextual references to his own poetry contribute to his desire to resolve existence through art, using escapism to navigate both the joy and despair of life.

Spatial and temporal setting in "To Autumn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" are central to each poem's meaning, but his use of this device is unique to each poem. His approach to setting varies drastically between the two poems; "To Autumn" mimics a pastoral in its fond recollection of a rural countryside in autumn, while "Ode to a Nightingale" crafts a fanciful journey through a warped reality. In "To Autumn", Keats seeks to convey setting through use of cultural references to the rural countryside and personifying Autumn into a woman whom the speaker follows around the farm. Not only do these choices contextualize the poem, but also create a sense of nostalgia for the more domestic, pastoral lifestyle that the speaker escapes to. In "Ideology and Audience Response to Death in Keats's 'To Autumn'", Mark Bracher reminds the reader of the different metonyms in this stanza that hold connotations of death. The images of reaping (16, 17), winnowing (15), threshing (14) and pressing (21-22) all "refer to different acts of separation that occur in harvesting...and thus embody the traditional signification of death as a limiting, separating event." (648) These images of finitude, however, are counteracted throughout the stanza by images that produce a sense of "security, peace and contentment." At the beginning of this stanza, the speaker happens upon a personified figure of Autumn in her "store" (12), where she is "sitting careless on a granary floor" (14). A "store" connotes an abundant harvest, with a variety of fruits, nuts and grain to sustain harvesters through the grueling winter months. This vision of plenty celebrates preparedness for the impending winter, rather than mourning the loss of warmth, natural growth and overall contentment.

In the same stanza, the speaker describes Autumn on a “half-reap’d furrow sound asleep/ Drows’d with the fume of poppies” (16-17). Poppies are a source of opium and can induce a powerful stupor, eliciting the image of a woman resting peacefully in a drug-induced haze. In Christianity, poppies are “recruited to represent death as a period of tranquil slumber” (Venefica), which Keats utilizes to symbolize nature’s descent into the winter months. This association is said to stem from red petals symbolizing the blood of Christ, making the poppy representative of resurrection and renewal. The speaker goes on to describe Autumn as she moves “like a gleaner” (18), steadying “[her] head across a brook” (19). Gleaners would collect leftover crops after the fields had been harvested, implying that Autumn is burdened both literally and figuratively – not only must she physically transport crops, but perhaps is growing forlorn at the thought of leaving this land to make way for winter. This image evokes a sense of nostalgia for the abundance of summer, but with the knowledge that Autumn will return in due time – she is not saying goodbye forever.

Despite the connotations of separation and death that the language in this stanza carries, feelings of peace and restfulness dominate Autumn’s day. The setting Keats crafts is created through this imagery, establishing both a physical and temporal location that provides the speaker a mental escape to the warmer months of the year. This ode celebrates eventual death of all things tied to an appreciation of the journey it took to get there, leaving the reader with the comforting reminder that good things are never gone forever. In “Ode to a Nightingale”, the speaker escapes reality through Keats’s setting of transience and fantasy, nothing of the homey countryside visited in “To Autumn”. The mythical references employed in “Ode to a Nightingale” create the understanding that this poem is tied to neither place nor time, but follows the speaker as their experience of reality is confused with their imagination.

In the first stanza, the speaker refers to the nightingale as a “light-winged Dryad of the trees” (7), whose song he is enamored by. By comparing the bird to a tree nymph, “Keats stresses the naturalness of the bird” (Kappel, 4) and grants the bird both historical and mythical significance. This becomes of stronger relevance later in the poem, when the speaker laments, “Though was not born for death, immortal Bird!” (63), and imagines the bird preserved in history through its eternal song. In the fourth stanza, the speaker expresses his intention to fly to the nightingale, but “not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,/ But on the viewless wings of Poesy,” (33-34). Bacchus is another name for Dionysus, the Roman god of wine, an example of Keats using metonymy to convey his wish to join the nightingale through poetry and not further intoxication. The speaker then reaches “the Queen-Moon on her throne/ Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays” (37-38). Here, Keats mythologizes the moon and stars into the kingdom of the night, to convey the speaker’s transportation to another world through their art. The speaker literally ascends to the moon and stars, the upward motion mirroring ascension to heaven, an otherworldly paradise accessed not by alcohol or a godly chariot but one’s own poetry.

In the seventh stanza of the poem, the speaker is reflecting on all of the historical time periods and events that the nightingale’s song has persevered through. He imagines Ruth, a biblical figure, listening to the song “when sick for home” (68) as she stands “in tears amid the alien corn” (69). In the Bible, after her husband dies, Ruth chooses to stay with her mother-in-law Naomi and travel to Naomi’s homeland, even when she is allowed to return home to her family. This inspired a strong friendship between the two women, who in Bethelhem met a man named Boaz while gleaning in his field. Boaz shared his harvest with the two women, and eventually became Ruth’s husband (The Story of Ruth, the Gleaner). Kappel rationalizes the inclusion of this reference by explaining that, “one voice Ruth hears amid the alien corn is that of

the man Boaz. She finds herself in the cornfield because she has, like the poet, chosen to forsake her native land for a foreign realm. Boaz' words, like the nightingale's song, promote and sanction that movement to a new world." (277) While there is no consensus on why Keats chose to include this particular reference, it may resonate with the speaker who is torn between two worlds – one familiar and the other alien, but home to a friend they are not willing to leave. Ruth stayed because Naomi, and perhaps the speaker wishes to remain in this fantasy world with the nightingale as his companion. This biblical reference also mediates between the two scenarios which precede and follow it – first, the speaker imagines the bird song heard “in ancient days by emperor and clown” (66), and only after the reference to Ruth envisions the song having “Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam/ Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.” (71-72) The stanza shifts from the song being heard throughout human history, to the creative speculation of the Bible and finally to fanciful lands of fairies and magic. This trajectory mimics the journey of the speaker and the nightingale's song, as it transports him from his human reality on a journey through a fantastically imaginative realm, one that can be tied definitively to any place nor time – it, like the nightingale's song, is immortalized in the imagination. The historical and mythic allusions seek to establish a drastically different spatial and temporal setting than Keats strives to in “To Autumn”, and yet both are important in how Keats utilizes escapism as a tool to explore his own existence and relationship with the natural world.

As a romantic poet, Keats strives to portray the subject-object unity achieved between an individual and their relationship with nature. This unity with nature is what provides inspiration to create art, bringing us higher on the chain of being and closer towards the immortal paradise Keats believed only to find through poetry. In “To Autumn”, Keats personifies the season of autumn as a woman who he describes exploring the countryside, embarking on different seasonal

activities. This personification could be interpreted as representing a seasonal deity, or even Mother Nature herself. Attention to her intrinsic unity with nature comes into focus within the middle of the poem, as the stanzas literally transport the reader through different phases of an individual's relationship with nature. James Lott discusses this in "Keats's 'To Autumn': The Poetic Consciousness and the Awareness of Process", pointing out that "the first two stanzas, unlike the third, reveal in the ordering of their images a speaker who does not seem to be sensitive to the fact that time is passing." (72) The first stanza depicts an appreciation, but not yet a union, with an autumnal landscape. The speaker imagines autumn conspiring with the sun on how to "load and bless/ With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run" (3-4), knowing they will "fill all fruit with ripeness to the core" (6) and "plump the hazel shells/With a sweet kernel" (7-8), amongst other autumnal changes. Lott observes that in the second stanza there is a shift from the personification of autumn as the 'bosom-friend of the...sun' (2) to the identification of the season with "four human figures associated with harvesting: a winnower, a reaper, a gleaner, and a person watching a cider press." (73) There is no indication in this stanza that the speaker is conscious of what is happening, no awareness of temporality or their place within the setting. This is the stanza of the greatest subject-object unity, because nature has been humanized simultaneously to the human becoming naturalized - the two are one and the same.

In the third stanza, the speaker's stupor seems to have been broken. The speaker is neither imagining autumn's communion with the sun or experiencing her exploration through the countryside, he is an active and conscious participant in the surrounding environment. He describes the song of autumn through a detailed description of the fields he is standing in, appealing to multiple senses in order to communicate his engagement with the natural setting. The speaker describes the plains touched by a "rosy hue" (36) and the "wailful choir [of] small

gnats” (37) that hover over the river, listening as the “hedge-cricket sing” (42) and the “gathering swallows twitter in the skies” (44). Engaging visual, auditory and tactile imagery represents the speaker’s ability to translate the subject-object unity, previously experienced in the second stanza, into his own poetry. Immersive experiences, such as those portrayed in the second stanza, cannot be translated into one’s art until the artist has pulled back and can observe things with the memory of the unity they had once experienced. By structuring his poem to traverse an individual’s consciousness of temporality and unity with nature, Keats represents his own experience with reality and the natural world as one that intrinsically requires subject-object unity in order to accurately convey and resolve his experiences through his poetry.

In “Ode to a Nightingale”, subject-object unity is continuously sought after by the speaker in hopes of achieving the same degree of naturalness that the nightingale embodies. In this poem, the speaker expresses his intention to become inebriated in order to leave the physical world and “with thee fade away into the forest dim” (19), ‘thee’ referring to the nightingale. After hearing the nightingale’s song in the first stanza, the speaker imagines they are in the region of Provence, in the south of France. Provence is known for the production of wine and as the home of the Troubadours, making it a significant point for the speaker to seek escape with the nightingale. Multiple historical and mythological allusions are made as the speaker consumes the Provençal wine and becomes inebriated; the Provençal song is a reference to the lyrical poetry of the Troubadours, and “the blushful Hippocrene” (15) alludes to the well of Hippocrene on Mount Helicon, which imparts poetic inspiration on those who drink from it (Hippocrene). Intoxication allows for letting go of oneself, creating subject-object unity through a loss of identification. The allusions to poetic inspiration suggest that this act of creation can only occur under the condition of subject-object unity that will bring the speaker closer to the world of the

nightingale. Wine dulls the mind but heightens the senses, allowing the speaker to “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget/ What though among the leaves hast never known.” (21-22) We can assume that by “among the leaves” the speaker is referring to the native inhabitants of nature, who aren’t preoccupied by “the weariness, the fever, and the fret” (23) that occupants of the human world are plagued by.

The subject-object unity between the speaker and the nightingale’s song, mediated by consumption of wine, is maintained until the bird begins to fly away. The speaker bids “Adieu! Adieu!” as the “plaintive anthem” (77) of the nightingale weakens, and he is transported back to reality as the birdsong fades “past the near meadow, and over the still stream” (74), indicating a physical separation between the speaker and the nightingale, and the speaker’s conscious return to reality as the experience of escapism is broken. The subject-object unity that transported the speaker on his imaginative journey cannot exist without the subject, the nightingale’s song, but this experience can be immortalized through art. References to poetic inspiration throughout the poem remind the reader that art transcends both time and space, making it the only way to negotiate the experiences of one’s existence and come to terms with both the painful and joyous realities of life.

Keats continues to convey his an experience of escapism by including intertextual references to his own poetry within both “To Autumn” and “Ode to a Nightingale”. Both poems contain references to the other, which creates a sense of continuity through Keats’s work and exhibits his desire for his poems to serve as a comprehensive recollection of his relationship with the natural world and the escape this allowed him. In “Ode to a Nightingale”, the reference to the biblical figure of Ruth parallels to the speaker in “To Autumn” comparing Autumn to “a gleaner” (19) that lowers their head while crossing a brook. Ruth was a gleaner herself, and it

was while she was gleaning in a field in Bethlehem with her friend Naomi that she meets a wealthy man named Boaz, who shared his harvest with her and eventually became her husband (The Story of Ruth, the Gleaner). The tones both gleaners are described with are similar, for the gleaner in “To Autumn” has their “laden head” (20) bowed as if carrying within them a heavy burden, and in “Nightingale” Ruth is described to stand “in tears amid the alien corn.” (69) This connection indicates the stress that gleaners, typically impoverished people, must endure in order to collect a sufficient amount of food to feed them and their family, but how ultimately fulfilling the task is. Not only did Ruth gather enough to feed herself and Naomi, but also met her future husband in the field, granting both Ruth and Naomi lives of contentment and bliss.

A parallel between the two poems can also be found between the mention of the “fume of poppies” (17) in “To Autumn” and the “drowsy numbness” (1) the speaker experiences in the first stanza of “Ode to a Nightingale”. He explicitly says that he feels as if he had “emptied some dull opiate into the drains” (3), a drug which is extracted from the poppy flower. As discussed early, the poppy carries various connotations across cultures, the most obvious being as source of opium, a highly addictive drug. The stupor that the speaker of “Nightingale” is induced in, along with the “drows’d” (18) appearance of the speaker in “To Autumn” as they lay in a bed of poppies, literalizes the escapism Keats seeks to convey. The flood of dopamine that opioids cause, creating intense feelings of pleasure, renders the drug an effective method of letting go of oneself and becoming immersed in feelings of well being. Keats’s references to variations of this experience, through poppies or opiates, represents the positive extremes experienced in life that can be juxtaposed by painful withdrawal.

Keats’s multiple references to birds establish a connection between the two poems constructed around the story of the nightingale, a bird mythologized in ancient Greek culture.

The myth of the nightingale centers around sisters Philomela and Procne, two sisters who are turned into a nightingale and a swallow after Procne murders her child to serve to her husband, Tereus, for dinner as revenge for raping her sister. Once Tereus discovers what she has done, he pursues them both with a sword until all three of them are turned into birds. Tereus becomes a hoopoe, Procne a swallow and Philomela is turned into a nightingale after the sisters prayed to the Gods to escape Tereus's wrath (although the birds of the two sisters are often reversed).

Throughout the many interpretations and variations of this story, the nightingale's song has come to be understood as a lament, representative of either a mother, Procne, mourning for her child, or the pain that Philomela endured when tortured by Tereus (Young, 185). The nightingale is an inspiration for poets because of its spontaneous song, often compared to poetry itself. In "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats appears to idealize the nightingale as a creature capable of writing the poetry he wishes himself able to, and the mention of the "gathering swallows twitter[ing] in the skies" (34) in "To Autumn" offers a subtle reference to the myth and Keats's poetic aspirations. This examples of intertextuality, along with the others, serve to exemplify Keats's goal of creating a cohesive body of work that, cumulatively, offers a more comprehensive exploration of the relationship between the natural world, artistic expression and his own reality. This is a tool of escapism because it renders each poem reliant on another in order to garner a more profound meaning, and implies that each does not exist in a vacuum – it is more powerful to read them in consideration of each other than individually.

"To Autumn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" are two self-contained representations of Keats's musings, until the connections between the two of them are analyzed and we can begin to understand his greater intentions. Keats uses tools of escapism to highlight both the great joys and sorrows of life, reminding his audience that both of these – and every emotion in between –

are a necessary, painful, and precious part of the human experience. This mindset is married to his belief that the only paradise humans will ever experience will be found within art, that neither earth nor heaven can bring us this salvation. The emotional and experiential spectrum along which humans live is a point of great interest to Keats, as he seeks to explore the nuances of his own unique experience with reality. By channeling the investment another writer may put into their faith into his passion for artistic expression, Keats raises his poetry to the precedence of divine spirituality. Keats sought to immortalize himself in his work, writing each of his poems to be appreciated both independently and in conversation with other pieces in his collection. His attentive use of spatial and temporal setting, subject-object unity and intertextual references memorialize his experience through his poetry and allow him to escape the finality of death by solidifying himself as one of the most remarkable writers of the Romantic tradition.

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