

# Keats and schopenhauer: nonhuman ignorance as escape



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The need to escape from agitation into tranquility is often sought after means to terminate suffering. The term “escape”, derived from the French “eschaper,” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a noun, “the action of escaping, or the fact of having escaped, from custody, danger,” and also a verb, “to gain one’s liberty by flight; to get free from detention or control, or from an oppressive or irksome tradition.” John Keats’ poem, “Ode to a Nightingale,” portrays both definitions as his dissatisfied speaker desperately seeks an end to his misery. In the presence of a nightingale, he examines a set of possible methods of escape from his discontented human life. His speaker fails to do so through multiple metaphors and concludes that complete escape and transcendence is impossible and only accessible by the nightingale, the nonhuman. In his philosophical piece, *Animals Have No Concepts*, Artur Schopenhauer further explores such tranquil ignorance of the nonhuman and why the human envies it so heavily, as seen in Keats’ poem. Schopenhauer concludes that the nonhuman is able to live in permanent “escape” through his correlation between the capacity to understand time and the capacity to understand suffering. Although explained more pessimistically by Keats, both men demonstrate the inability of the human to fully escape into the world of the nonhuman, the world of absolute ignorance of complexity.

Keats delves immediately into the melancholy of his speaker, beginning the poem with the line, “My heart aches” (1). Feeling lethargic, downtrodden, and plagued by a dullness of sense, he makes clear that it is not envy that he feels toward the nightingale but “being too happy in thine happiness” (6). Desirous of leaving the human world and becoming one with the

nonhuman, the speaker explores various methods of attaining such transcendence and simplicity. To achieve this escape, Keats' speaker first attempts to drown his sorrows in the "draught of vintage" (11). He hopes that after drinking this substance filled with all of nature's goodness he can "leave the world unseen" and join the nightingale in a world free of "weariness, the fever, and the fret," a world in which the nightingale has no knowledge or awareness of (23). He realizes that drinking alcohol does allow him to leave his sufferings, but also that its temporary euphoria will not permanently relive or satisfy him. Without transition, Keats' speaker moves on from his previously desired scenario of perfection and discusses his wishes to escape from the human world on the "viewless wings of Poesy" (33). After his first method of escape fails him, he hopes to reach transcendence through the beauty and timelessness of poetry. It is in this moment when the act of taking flight resembles the concept of escape. He imagines himself flying above a world that is no longer visible to him, the human world. He then loses his sense of sight as night approaches, however he is still able to visualize "the grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild; white hawthorn, and the pastoral elegantine" below him, hearing the "murmerous haint of flies on summer eves" (45-50). Like the "draught of vintage" that he hoped would free him from his misery, poetry also disappoints him as it does not give him the power to physically nor emotionally fly above the human world with the nightingale into transcendence and ignorance of life's complexities. Overcome with despair after failing two attempts to better his life, Keats' speaker turns toward his only remaining method of escape, the ultimate and rather terrifying method of death.

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Through the two failed attempts of escape, Keats' speaker finds himself even more connected to the human world in which he despises, which causes him to come to the conclusion that death is the only remaining method of permanent end to his anguish. He claims, "Darkling I listen; and for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death... Now more than ever it seems rich to die, to cease upon this midnight with no pain" (51-56). He is so overcome with sorrow and at such a breaking point that even death, however attained, will afflict no pain upon him. At this moment the true desperation and yearning of Keats' suffering speaker is exposed, as he seeks the most permanent and irreversible method of escape to simply cease to be. Only through death will he be able to discover simplicity and peace, far fled from the pain and suffering of the human world. Although he hails these methods of escape while remaining envious of the nonhuman who is able to avoid such suffering, he does not once take action with any of them. He creates his escape through intoxication, poetry, and death, however he does not do so to escape his reality. His thoughts may stray to such forms, however he takes no direct action other than escape through his imagination; the only thought in his mind, his appreciation for the immortal nightingale, the addressee of his ode, remains constant. Approaching the nightingale he praises, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird! No hungry generations tread thee down" (61-62).

Schopenhauer also discusses the nonhuman and the concept of death, "The brutes (nonhumans)...enjoy quietly and peacefully each present moment, even if it is only bearable...the brutes do not properly speaking feel death: they can only know it when it appears, and then they are already no more...it

(nonhuman) lives without reflection, and exists wholly in the present” (38-39). The nonhuman is so blissfully unaware of life’s complexities that even generations of humans cannot silence its immortal and transcendent song, a reality that Keats’ speaker feels deeply in his soul. The poem is rather paradoxical as Keats’ speaker, a man who has more power, knowledge, and intelligence, praises and completely devotes himself to a delicate and fragile animal. The physical and emotional prowess of the nightingale serves no purpose in the human world, a world full of the suffering of the intelligent and the powerful. During the contemplation of his own life, the speaker stops to reflect upon the eminence of the nightingale’s song, “ Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—To thy high requiem become a sod” (59-60). Despite his success or failure of escape, he questions his internal state previously portrayed in the beginning of the poem. Opening and closing the poem in a hazy state of confusion, he asks himself, “ Fled is that music—Do I wake or sleep?” (80). Unsure of the logic or actuality of his encounter with the nightingale, he is once again downtrodden and alone in nature. Unsure of whether his encounter is meaningful or revealing, he finds the ethereal nature of the nightingale difficult to understand. He then reaches a conclusion that transcendence from the anguish in which he endures is impossible. He is so attached to the natural, nonhuman world is a world that he will never reach, no matter how hard he tries, as he cannot annihilate his humanness.

Schopenhauer further describes the nonhuman inability to suffer that frustrates Keats’ speaker so deeply: “ The brutes (nonhumans) have infinitely less to suffer than we (humans) have, because they know no other

pains by those which the present directly brings. But the present is without extension, while the future and the past, which contain most of the causes of our suffering, are widely extended, and to their actual content there is added that which is merely possible, which opens up an unlimited field for desire and aversion. The brutes, on the contrary, [are] undisturbed by these” (38). Keats’ speaker only desires one thing in life, the ability to leave it. Although he calmly ponders on which method of escape will most benefit him, it is clear that he is aware of the pointlessness of each. Even if he were to follow through with the method of death, he would still be unable to transcend into natural divinity with the nightingale. His days of childhood innocence and nurture are long gone and his knowledge of time is indestructible, thus he is left eternally plagued by the suffering and misery of humanness.

Escape is unachievable by any human, despite that human’s extent of power or intelligence. Fantasies of contentment and transcendence are nearly impossible to come by, and Keats describes the curse of human suffering in an ode to a nonhuman who will never need to be aware of it. Unlike the humans trudging in anguish in the world below, the song of the nonhuman nightingale stands tall in its supreme immortality. Humans will continue to suffer until they die, but the song and spirit of the nonhuman will continue to live and thrive, despite its delicacy and fragility. Keats explores the tragic impossibility of escape from humanity in this poem. Although the portrait of life in which he paints is dark and negative, he conveys a similar message to Schopenhauer, that the human and nonhuman are physically and emotionally nonexchangeable. Despite this disadvantage, humans are to

thus cherish what the nonhuman brings to the human world, as they separate the joys from the sorrows and the beauty from the pain.