

Comparison of "ode  
to a nightingale", "to  
autumn" and "bright  
star would i were s...



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Keats's preoccupation with the inescapable precession of time and mutability is evident in all three poems: "Ode to a Nightingale," the ode "To Autumn" and the sonnet, "Bright Star, Would I were as Steadfast as Thou Art." In his "Ode to a Nightingale," the bird's singing becomes a symbol for Keats, of a place that is impervious to human despair and constant in its same eternal song; he wishes to escape to it before realizing that it would cast him into a state of non-existence, whereby he retracts. Similarly, in his sonnet, "Bright Star, Would I were as Steadfast as Thou Art," Keats realizes that his worship of an ideal world would negate the happiness he is experiencing which leads him to reject his former yearnings. "To Autumn," however, is an unqualified celebration of Nature and of change, which suggest Keats's ultimate maturation of thought, whereby he ceases to desire the impossible, instead replacing his thought with the acknowledgement and acceptance that nature will continue to proceed, despite the fact that he won't be there to witness the flux of time. "Ode to a Nightingale" begins with a soporific heaviness, an intense description of "drowsy numbness" and the "[pain]" that encroaches into this state despite its oxymoronic nature. This characterizes the reason as to why Keats wishes to "fade away into the forest dim" with the Nightingale, whose "singest of summer in full-throated ease" begins to represent another world for Keats, one where the despair of man-kind is unknown, where the "weariness, the fever and the fret" ceases to exist. With richly explicit language of dissatisfaction, Keats casts a morose mood, which reinforces his aching desire for a "beaker full of the warm South," for "Dance and Provencal song." The South forms a geographical emblem of sanctuary from the harsh realities of winter, and Provence of France is typically associated with luxury and enjoyment of life. Keats longs for a "

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draught of vintage," not for the sake of falling into a drunken state, but as another portal of escape, whereby he might be delivered into the world that the Nightingale occupies. Yet, in the fourth stanza, Keats rejects " Bacchus and his pards," and thus rejects wine in favour of " the viewless wings of Poesy." He acknowledges that the " dull brain perplexes and retards," that analytical thought distorts what otherwise might be purely felt, but he hence reasserts his own personal will and strength to attain that state of transcendence on his own terms, through " Poesy" which represents poetry and imagination. However, once his imagination has taken him there, he realizes that " here there is no light," a foreshadowing for his retraction back into the light, for darkness may be seductive and " easeful" but it's also a negation of existence, and thus, of feeling. Keats asserts that the darkness is " embalmed," which has two meanings, of fragrance and a preserved corpse. Therein lies the irony, as although the darkness may be pleasantly presented, it is essentially an entrapment all of its own. The counter-movement in Keats's sensibilities occurs, wherein he realizes that the Nightingale's " high requiem" will be in vain if he is to die, and to thus become a " sod." The poet thereby comes to the conclusion that non-existence and thus the inability to feel the bird's ecstasy is counter-productive. The reverie is abandoned when the Nightingale flies away, leaving the poet with an inconclusive close, the question marks enhancing the fact that the poem's end is doubtful and unresolved. The sonnet " Bright Star, Would I were Steadfast as Thou Art," however, is more conclusive with its ending lines. Keats desires to be as constant as the star which he spies, yet, the reality is that he cannot truthfully identify with it, as such an ambition is impossible for a human being. The star is " sleepless", and ever "

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watching," always an observer and never a participant. The first quatrain which is dedicated to the star's description is static, completely stationary. With the descent to Earth, there is finally movement, as change is inevitable on the " human shores." Keats uses a series of religious terms, such as " Eremite," " priestlike task" and " pure ablution," and this exemplifies the cold and perpetually alone nature of the star in comparison to the human world, wherein Keats is " pillow'd upon [his] fair love's ripening breast." The poet characterizes this moment as a " sweet unrest," a typical Keatsian oxymoron, which demonstrates the mixed nature of life. There is a repetition of terms pertaining to time such as " still," and " for ever", indicating the tension that time imposes on Keats. However, like in " Ode to a Nightingale," Keats comes to accept that the world in which he already inhabits is flawed in its pained reality, yet also pleasurable. The last line indicates Keats's turnabout and desire to partake in a life of love, passion and sensuality rather than an eternity of loneliness, as per the star. " To Autumn" constitutes a reconciliation of conflicting desires in Keats, as he comes to celebrate Nature, its beauty and its timeless quality in an unconditional manner. His luscious evocation of Nature and the forms in which the natural order takes place is evoked in his enacting enjambment, his recognition that nature is continual and his celebration of its overload on the senses. He records a fecundity of " mellow fruitfulness," of trees that are so full that they " bend with apples," of fruit that is filled with " ripeness to the core." Keats's description of the overflowing fruitfulness is almost unbearable in its intensity. His second stanza however, begins to attenuate. Autumn is personified as a reaper, a harvester and a thresher; it crosses a brook and watches a cyder press. Otherwise, Autumn is listless and even falls asleep.

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The last line of the stanza suggests the slow-down in the pronunciation of its concentration of long vowels, combined with difficult articulation which impedes forward movement. Keats questions where there "songs of Spring" are, and he also makes mention of Summer. In this way, it becomes apparent that time is flowing, the seasons are shifting continually. Keats describes the Autumn's song, its verbal music from the "small gnats" that "mourn" and the "full-grown lambs" that "bleat". "Mourn" has a despairing note, and the lambs are doomed to be slayed in Autumn, thus, the slightest intimation of death is introduced, yet Keats resists and leaves the ode with a clear, unambiguous conclusion, that of acceptance of the transitory that is just another aspect of nature and of beauty. Keats's conclusive notes in "Ode to a Nightingale," "Bright Star, Would I were Steadfast as Thou Art," and "To Autumn," all have a common underlying thread, and that is Keats's essential reconciliation with time and change, of the end of longing and of the knowledge and experienced required for acceptance.