

Reconciling mortality and immortality in john keats' "ode to a nightingale"



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In John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," a despairing speaker overhears a nightingale in the depths of a far away forest. The speaker yearns to leave behind his physical world and join the bird in its metaphysical world. The nightingale sings of a world where there is no pain, there are muted senses, and life is immortal: the opposite of the speaker's domain. The speaker considers joining the nightingale's world of immortality by means of alcohol, death, and finally by creating art of his own. John Keats explores these themes in "Ode to a Nightingale" to illustrate the speaker's battle with the reconciling of conscious and unconscious worlds. The major theme in this poem focuses on the reconciling of many opposites as Richard Fogle summarizes in his article, "Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale': The principal stress of the poem is a struggle between ideal and actual: inclusive terms which, however, contain more particular antitheses of pleasure and pain, of imagination and commonsense reason, of fullness and privation, of permanence and change, of nature and the human, of art and life, freedom and bondage, waking and dream. (Fogle, 211) While all of these opposites play against one another throughout, in this article, I intend to focus on how Keats attempts to balance mortality and immortality in "Ode to a Nightingale." Unhappy with the pain and inevitability of death in the conscious world, Keats looks into ways to circumvent the unpleasantness of this physical state. Keats explores the opposing worlds of the conscious and unconscious in many of his odes. He seems very interested in combining the two worlds, reconciling their opposites, and therefore reaping the best of both states. "Ode to a Nightingale" stands as yet another step in Keats' journey to this desired reconciliation. A previous ode, "Ode on Indolence," rejects the conscious world altogether, while "Ode to Psyche" celebrates an

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opposite state of creativity. "Ode on Melancholy" focuses on the pain and beauty found in reality and the action required in this reality. "Ode to a Nightingale" attempts to locate a point in between these two states of reality and illusion through means of drugging, death, or creativity. In his article, "The Sub-Text of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale,'" Karl Wentersdorf explains the importance of this ode: "In a sense, the excursion in 'Ode to a Nightingale' records in brief the aesthetic and psychological journey that had led Keats to a more mature judgement regarding poetry and its relation to life," (Wentersdorf, 82). Keats is very interested in how life and the world of poetry mingle together and can possibly merge. Later, "To Autumn" will finally accomplish what is hinted to by "Ode to a Nightingale." Keats is able to accept the passage of time and find a point merging mortality and immortality, permanence and impermanence, ripeness and decay, dark and light, and so on. "Ode to a Nightingale" is an important step along Keats' exploration of a merging of opposites and extracting the best of both worlds. Two major opposites that Keats attempts to balance found within "Ode to a Nightingale" are mortality and immortality. The conscious world of the speaker is one which entails the inevitability of death. The unconscious world of the nightingale is one of immortality. The speaker will meet physical death at some point, while the bird and its song will live forever. In his article, "The Immortality of the Natural: Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale,'" Kappel focuses on why the nightingale is seen as immortal and man is not: "This ontological difference gives rise to the essential experiential distinction between the two beings, around which the poem is built: the bird is oblivious to death, man painfully aware of it," (Kappel, 272). The nightingale does not know of death, and therefore lives every day with no thought of the life ceasing. On the <https://assignbuster.com/reconciling-mortality-and-immortality-in-john-keats-ode-to-a-nightingale/>

other hand, the speaker is mortal in that he knows of and expects death. Also to be noted, the nightingale is of the natural world. Nature — and, likewise, the nightingale — is eternal and never knows death (Kappel, 272). Keats points to this idea: Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget What thou among the leaves hast never known, The weariness, the fever, and the fret Here, where men sit and hear each other groan; (ll. 21-24) Keats wants to sink into the natural and primitive world of the nightingale where the worries of man are not known. The bird is emphasized as dwelling among the leaves, a strong symbol of nature. Likewise, Keats describes the bird and nature as free from burden; hence they are immortal, unlike man. In his quest to reconcile the two worlds and escape the pain and mortality of the conscious world, the speaker considers several options. In order to join the mockingbird in its dark world empty of pain and full of permanence, the speaker first explores drunkenness. The speaker calls for a quantity of wine: O for a beaker full of the warm South Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene, With beaded bubbles winking at the brim, And purple-stained mouth; That I might drink, and leave the world unseen, And with thee fade away into the forest dim: (ll. 15-20) Here, the speaker hopes that alcohol can bring him into the world of the nightingale by numbing his consciousness and the pains of mortal life. Wine, in itself, represents a strong symbol of a merged mortality and immortality. The winking of the bubbles may hint at the merging of conscious and unconscious, as a wink is neither a closed eye or a fully open one. The purple of the wine is another merging, as blue is a cool and somber color, while red is a vibrant and lively color. Wine also merges the two worlds because it contains symbols of life such as the ripe grapes of summer and the “ warm South.” It also contains symbols of death, as it is aged as a

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mortal being would age and stored under the earth and in a dark and tomblike setting. Wine not only acts as a symbol of the merging of conscious and unconscious, but it also acts as a medium. With the drinking of wine, the speaker can leave the conscious world and dip into the unconscious.

However, alcohol cannot provide a lasting combination of these two states, as the effects of wine are only temporary. To skirt this temporary state, the speaker thinks of death as a solution to escaping the unpleasantness of the conscious world. Death would be the ultimate escape from the unconscious world. In Jeffery Baker's work, *John Keats and Symbolism*, he discusses the fault that Keats finds in the idea of escaping the pains of the conscious world and enveloping the unconscious by means of death: "Keats' position at this moment in the poem is that consciousness is extinguished by death, but the contrary case is offered by the conflicting implications of the diction. If Keats dies, he will cease, but the bird will continue to pour its soul abroad" (Baker, 148). Therefore, while death may seem like the perfect solution, it lacks the immortality that unconsciousness offers when posed against consciousness. Death oversteps the reconciliation of opposites that Keats' attempts to achieve, as death is overly final. Janet Spens furthers this idea in her article, "A Study of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'": Death would make him deaf and blind to the beauty of the world concentrated in the bird's song, and he cries out that it is of immortal life not death that the nightingale sings: its song 'beckons' him to the 'fellowship divine': he has stepped into the oneness of the world of pure emotion. (Spens, 242) Death ignores the desired aspects of the conscious and unconscious worlds. The beauty and activity of the physical world, and the immortality of the nonphysical world are lost with

death. To reap the benefits of both worlds, the speaker must look beyond the <https://assignbuster.com/reconciling-mortality-and-immortality-in-john-keats-ode-to-a-nightingale/>

simple, mediocre, and temporary method of drunkenness and stop short of the final, extreme, and blinding method of death. The speaker must join the nightingale's immortal song with a song of his own. The remaining option allows the speaker to join the immortal world through action. The conscious and unconscious worlds can thereby be reconciled: immortality being part of the unconscious world, and action being that of the conscious. Indolence must be pushed aside, while physical death must be accepted. Through this give and take, the speaker may reach the point where the two worlds combine. The nightingale and its song can be likened to the poet and its poem: "If the nightingale's song is a symbol of lyric poetry, the words 'immortal Bird' must refer to the Poet" (Kappel, 270). Hence, the nightingale as a poet will live on through the art it creates. The bird's song will be heard generation after generation, as Keats states: 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 clown: (ll. 61-64) The song is heard by all throughout the past and in the future. Therefore, the song and its creator, the bird, never die. Hence, the speaker finds the much sought-after immortality in the world of the nightingale and its song, and is moved to join the bird through the act of his own creation of art. While the speaker may not be able to physically live forever, his song, like the nightingale's, will live on. In this sense, the speaker as a poet will also live eternal. To live forever, the speaker must pull away from indolence, and create. He cannot rely on alcohol: Away! Away! For I will fly to thee, Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, But on the viewless wings of Poesy, (ll. 31-33) Here, the speaker rejects alcohol as a legitimate solution for his desire for reconciling the conscious and unconscious worlds. Neither can he rely on <https://assignbuster.com/reconciling-mortality-and-immortality-in-john-keats-ode-to-a-nightingale/>

death. He will join the nightingale's immortality through the creation of his own song. Keats' sixth stanza speaks of how death might prove the solution: I have been half in love with easeful Death, Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme, To take into the air my quiet breath; Now more than ever seems it rich to die, To cease upon the midnight with no pain, While thou art pouring fourth thy soul abroad In such an ecstasy! Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— To thy high requiem become a sod. (ll. 51-60) Here, the speaker is tempted with thoughts of death, as it would surely end all pains. Yet, he is quick to realize that while all of his mortal pains would be eased, the bird would live and sing on. On the other hand, the consciousness of the speaker would be dead, and therefore unable to experience this beauty and immortality. The bird would live and create still, while the speaker would have left the life and beauty of the conscious world and consequently sunk below this world to a final unconsciousness. He is buried beneath the earth, unable to enjoy both conscious and unconsciousness. Therefore, he sees that the key to reaping the pleasure of both states and living eternal is to mimic the nightingale's method. He must create poetry. John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" explores how one might find a balance between the conscious physical world and the unconscious nonphysical world. He hopes to avoid the unpleasing aspects of these worlds and take only the best qualities of both: "The Ode is an attempt to find a poetic Paradise, that is to say a state of mind in which 'the weariness, the fever and the fret' will be forgotten and only the ecstasy of the poetic perception will exist" (Spens, 242). One specific goal within this desire is the speaker's desire for the immortality that the nightingale possesses. In his search for this reconciliation of opposites, the speaker in Keats' poem considers <https://assignbuster.com/reconciling-mortality-and-immortality-in-john-keats-ode-to-a-nightingale/>

reaching this goal through intoxication, death, and ultimately, poetry. How successful this method of creation is remains to be seen in future odes.

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