

Comparison of anne
finch's 'to the
nightingale' and
samuel coleridge's 'to
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Anne Finch's 'To The Nightingale' and Samuel Coleridge's identically titled poem both display a pastoral appreciation of nature. The two poems are both conversation poems. This was a particularly popular form in the Romantic Period, and used conversational language to discuss higher themes of nature and morality. The protagonists address the nightingale, and use it as a symbol to illustrate the human soul. Despite their similarity in theme, the two poems differ greatly in content. Finch's narrator sees the bird as a free soul in comparison to her own human lack of inspiration, whereas Coleridge celebrates the human form.

Finch and Coleridge's poems display similarities and differences in their speaker, especially in the manner that the bird is addressed. Both speakers display appreciation for nature and the joy it brings. The speaker in Finch's poem gives the Nightingale identity through an important role in the changing of seasons, urging the Nightingale to: '[exert] Thy Voice, Sweet Harbinger of Spring!'. The use of the capitalized 'Harbinger' signals the nightingale's status: it announces the beginning of another season. It is also particularly poignant that the season is spring, as the song indicates a new beginning, with the exclamation mark reflecting the vibrancy of the Spring months. Additionally, Finch appears to personify the nightingale by labeling its bird call as a 'voice', something that usually one would assume to be human. This elevates the bird's status further, and perhaps also presents a sense of envy from the speaker. They view the nightingale as free from human inspiration, and wish that they themselves could embody such traits. Therefore, Finch's speaker shows their reverence for the bird by elevating it

from animal to human, and attributing it this important task as the announcer of Spring.

In Coleridge's poem, he also gives the Nightingale an ethereal label, 'Minstrel of the Moon', implying the bird has power over the 'full-orb'd Queen.' His construction of the nightingale seems to encompass the sublime; it has been raised up out of everyday animal life to a higher cause, as if it is controlling aspects of nature. Coleridge uses alliteration to emphasize the nightingale's label, attributing a poetic importance to the animal. Similarly to Finch, Coleridge presents an anthropomorphic image, presenting the nightingale as a 'minstrel', an old-fashioned medieval singer or musician. This suggests that the nightingale almost serenades the natural world, placing it in a position of power. It is also interesting to consider the idea of a musician within a conversation poem. Despite this title, it is only the speaker who offers conversation. The nightingale is unable to offer its own words, yet is given an identity and importance through how the speaker observes it, and how Coleridge describes it. Throughout both poems, Coleridge and Finch portray the nightingale and its song as melancholy. Later on in the poem, Coleridge's speaker 'ceases to listen' to the song, discrediting any importance he earlier attributed to the nightingale as a musician. Therefore, the identity of the nightingale is decided in each poem through how the speaker perceives it, raising interesting questions on the nature of perception and truth, a key topic in the Romantic Period.

Throughout both poems, the typical pastoral symbol of the nightingale is used to present a comparison to human happiness. Finch focuses on the happiness of the bird to further emphasize the frustration of the poet: And <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-anne-finchs-to-the-nightingale-and-samuel-coleridges-to-the-nightingale/>

still th' unhappy Poet's Breast, Like thine, when best he sings, is plac'd against a Thorn. Finch's speaker compares herself directly to the bird, comparing the 'Poet's Breast' to that of the nightingale; it is interesting that the poet lacks academic inspiration but the problem appears in her chest. This suggests perhaps that writing comes from the heart, and not the mind. It also implies an atmosphere of the bittersweet, as the nightingale is free to sin but is subject to the sharp edge of a thorn, much like Finch is subject to the criticism of her own society. Additionally, this frustration within the poem is extremely relevant of Finch's own frustrations as a poet in the seventeenth century. She criticized Alexander Pope's Rape of the Lock that openly undermined the ability of a woman's wit. This overtly suggests that Finch could have been the 'unhappy Poet', caged through not only her lack of inspiration, but the social conditions of her generation that assume women are incapable of literature or art. This is almost ironic in a conversation poem, where the nightingale is used merely as a voice to illustrate the narrator's anxieties.

Coleridge presents the opposite to Finch, placing humanity in an elevated state of happiness in comparison to the Nightingale. It is interesting to consider that the influence of Coleridge's love, who makes the nightingale's song a mockery of her own sweetness:

...not so sweet as is the voice of her,

My Sara- best beloved of human kind!

The personal pronoun 'my' indicates possessiveness over her beauty, whilst the dash acts as a poetic pause, as if Coleridge is temporarily distracted by <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-anne-finchs-to-the-nightingale-and-samuel-coleridges-to-the-nightingale/>

his intense attraction. The typical values of Romantic poetry is to describe the joy of nature, however the speaker extends this to celebrate also human life. Coleridge specifies Sara as the ' best beloved of human kind', elevating her over the rest of humanity. This perhaps suggests that only the almost ethereal can sound sweeter than the nightingale's voice. In terms of context, there is an ambiguity surrounding the female figure, even as she is named. Coleridge was married to Sara Fricker, yet also fell in love with Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's future sister-in-law. This poem could therefore have two meanings: it could either be a sweet verse for his beloved wife, or it could be a declaration of unrequited love, only possible through the safe enclosures of words.

Thus far, the content and language of each poem has been examined. However, both poems also convey meaning through their structure and form. Finch separates her poem in to four stanzas. This is perhaps a physical representation of the four seasons, of which the content also reflects. The first stanza, which would represent Spring, is full of joyous descriptors and phrases such as ' sweet', ' praise' and ' song'. In comparison, the fourth stanza, that would represent winter, is incredibly melancholy and representative of the long nights and tumultuous weather of the later months. Finch's structure could also have used these stanzas to balance the comparison of the natural elements with humanity. The entirety of the first stanza is dedicated to the nightingale, whilst the second is based on the speaker's frustration over lack of imagination. This is emphasized by Finch's choice of rhyme scheme, that features mostly rhyming couplets. This could

represent the nightingale and female poet side by side to further show the contrast between the free and the entrapped.

In comparison, Coleridge writes a single stanza in blank verse. This could perhaps suggest the focus on humanity, and not seasons, emphasizing the single human life rather than the four seasons. Whilst there is no apparent rhyme scheme to Coleridge's *To The Nightingale*, he employs iambic pentameter, of which gives the poem a lyrical, almost song-like rhythm that reflects the song of the 'Most musical, most melancholy Bird!' Finch also uses iambic feet, however this time is less regular as many of the lines are in tri-meter with an extra syllable. Therefore, whilst the lyrical rhythm could represent the nightingale, the irregularity could represent the human aspect in this poem, and their arbitrary nature of her inspiration.

Whilst these poems differ thematically and in content, they both adhere to the pastoralist tradition that was often used in the Romantic period. The pastoralist tradition is usually identified as using nature artificially, in order to simply create a contrast to human suffering. As it has been discussed, Finch's poem very much adheres to this ideal and sees a freedom and lack of oppression in the nightingale that she can never hope for. Coleridge, however, does not seem to adhere so closely, despite being perhaps the most famous romantic poet. He instead engages with the opposite, and uses the nightingale to illustrate the fortune of humanity. Therefore, despite both poems being within the Romantic tradition, their biggest contrast is in how much they actually each adhere to its conventions.