

## UNCOVERING THE ELEMENTS OF ESCAPISM IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF JOHN KEATS AND ROBERT FROST A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Laiba<sup>1\*</sup>, Dawood Said<sup>2</sup>, Iqra BiBi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>M. Phil Scholar Northern University Nowshehra,

<sup>2</sup> Visiting Lecturer Govt. Collage Gulabad Dir Lower,

<sup>3</sup>M. Phil Scholar Northern University Nowshehra

<sup>1\*</sup>[laibayaseen333@gmail.com](mailto:laibayaseen333@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[dawoodsaid048@gmail.com](mailto:dawoodsaid048@gmail.com), <sup>3</sup>[iqradoll625@gmail.com](mailto:iqradoll625@gmail.com)

Corresponding Author: \*

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### ABSTRACT

Keats and Frost's poetic repertoire is characterized by presenting the beautiful and serene landscapes and natural elements that inspire their readers in an effective manner. Thus the poetry of both poets presents nature in a sophisticated and majestic ways. But despite their true love with nature and natural elements, they are not happy with the prevailing system of life. This is because both of them experienced harsh and tough realities in their lives. Since they were not satisfied with the existing scheme of this life, they are often in quest to seek escapism from the actualities of this world of light and dark. Thus they seek release by leaving this real world behind for some ideal world where there is perfection. This quest of escapism can be seen in the great and everlasting works these poets produced. This paper intends to sort out the elements of escapism in the selected poems of John Keats and Robert Frost. The researchers utilized the technique of comparative analysis in order to find out the elements of escapism in poetry of these poets. For this purpose, Keats' poem Ode to a nightingale and Frost Poem Birches were selected. Thus, the primary source of data for this work was the two mentioned poems of these poets. The comparative analysis reveals that both of the poets strongly wish to flee from this real world and to leave for some other imaginary world in order to seek perfection as both of them were entirely exhausted of the worldly worries, responsibilities and imperfection.

**Keywords:** Escapism, Ode to a Nightingale, Birches, Comparative Analysis, Robert Frost, John Keats, Real World, Ideal World

### INTRODUCTION

Poetry has long been a medium through which writers explore the complexities of human experience, and nature has often served as a profound and evocative backdrop in this exploration. The natural world, with its beauty and majesty, has inspired countless poets to reflect on themes of existence, beauty, and the human condition. Among the poets who have profoundly engaged with nature in their works are Robert Frost and John Keats. Though they hail from different times and places—Frost from early 20th-century America and Keats from early 19th-century England—their poetry exhibits a shared

fascination with nature and its potential to evoke deep emotional and philosophical responses.

Robert Frost's poetry is deeply rooted in the rural landscapes of New England, capturing the simplicity and complexity of life in the countryside. His works, such as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Birches," not only depict serene and idyllic scenes but also delve into the deeper themes of isolation, human limitation, and the passage of time. Frost's use of colloquial language and vivid imagery invites readers to explore the interplay between the external environment and internal contemplation, creating a space where nature becomes a medium

for philosophical inquiry and existential reflection (Nasrin, 2008).

In contrast, John Keats, a central figure of the Romantic movement, employs nature to evoke a sense of idealism and transcendence. His poems, like "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn," are renowned for their lush, sensory-rich descriptions that elevate the natural world to a realm of sublime beauty. Keats's portrayal of nature often serves as an escape from the harsh realities of his own life, marked by personal loss and illness. This escapism is not merely a retreat but a pursuit of an eternal, unchanging ideal that stands in stark contrast to the transient and often painful human experience (Ara, 2021).

Despite the differences in their stylistic approaches and thematic preoccupations, Frost and Keats share a common thread in their use of nature as a means to seek escapism. This longing to transcend the mundane and find solace in an idealized natural world is a recurring motif in their poetry. Frost's "Birches," for instance, presents the act of swinging on birch trees as a metaphor for a temporary escape from the burdens of adulthood, a return to the innocence of youth. Similarly, in "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats yearns to flee from the sufferings of the real world and join the nightingale in its timeless song, a symbol of ultimate beauty and peace (Kabir & Jamil, 2012).

The comparative analysis of Frost and Keats reveals that their quest for escapism is driven by a deep dissatisfaction with the imperfections and sufferings of the real world. Both poets, through their engagement with nature, articulate a desire to leave behind the temporal constraints of human existence and find refuge in an idealized realm where beauty, tranquility, and perfection reign supreme. This study seeks to uncover the elements of escapism in their poetry, focusing on Frost's "Birches" and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," and to understand how their personal experiences and philosophical outlooks shape their poetic expressions of this longing (Suddard, 1912).

by examining the selected poems of Robert Frost and John Keats, this paper aims to elucidate the ways in which both poets utilize nature to articulate their desire for escapism. Through a comparative analysis, the study highlights the similarities and differences in their approaches

and underscores the enduring power of nature in poetry to evoke profound emotional and philosophical responses. This exploration not only enhances our understanding of Frost and Keats as individual poets but also contributes to the broader discourse on the role of nature in literary expressions of human longing and aspiration.

## **Review of Literature**

### **I. Nature as a Reflective Mirror**

Robert Frost and John Keats skillfully use nature as a reflective mirror to illuminate human emotions, forging a profound connection between the reader and the poetic persona. In Frost's "Birches," the act of swinging on birch trees becomes a powerful metaphor for escaping the burdens of adulthood and revisiting the innocence of youth. This poem demonstrates Frost's mastery in blending simple rural imagery with deep philosophical insights (Suddard, 1912; Ara, 2021). Similarly, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" delves into the theme of escapism, where the nightingale's song transports the poet from his painful reality to a realm of idealized beauty and eternal youth. The nightingale's song symbolizes transcendence and the poet's desire to escape the temporal constraints of human existence (Nasrin, 2008; Kabir & Jamil, 2012).

### **ii. Comparative Analysis of Romanticism and Modernism**

While Robert Frost is often categorized as a modernist due to his period of activity, his poetry retains significant elements of Romanticism, especially in its treatment of nature. Frost's approach to nature is both realistic and symbolic, reflecting the complexities of modern life and human psychology (Suddard, 1912; Ara, 2021). His poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" exemplifies this blend, with the tranquil, snowy woods representing a temporary escape from life's obligations, yet underscoring the inevitability of returning to reality. In contrast, Keats's Romanticism is more idealistic and less fraught with the ambiguities of modern existence. His portrayal of nature is more straightforwardly celebratory, as seen in "To Autumn," where the season is depicted in its full ripeness and beauty, symbolizing a harmonious

relationship between humanity and the natural world (Kabir & Jamil, 2012; Nasrin, 2008).

### **iii. Escapism and the Ideal World**

Both poets express a deep desire to escape from the imperfections of the real world to an idealized realm, albeit in different ways. Frost's "Birches" and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" reveal a longing to transcend mundane reality. For Frost, this escape is often temporary and rooted in the physical act of engaging with nature, such as climbing birch trees. His escapism is grounded and pragmatic, reflecting his New England sensibilities (Ara, 2021). Keats, on the other hand, seeks a more permanent escape into the realm of the ideal and the eternal, as evidenced by his yearning to join the nightingale in its timeless song. This longing is reflective of Keats's broader Romantic quest for beauty and perfection amidst the suffering and transience of human life (Nasrin, 2008).

### **iv. Symbolism and Imagery in Nature**

The symbolic use of nature in the poetry of Frost and Keats serves to deepen the thematic complexity of their works. Frost's "Birches" uses the imagery of a boy swinging on trees as a symbol of escapism and resilience against the hardships of life (Suddard, 1912; Ara, 2021). Similarly, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" employs rich imagery to create a vivid contrast between the painful reality of human life and the idealized, eternal world of the nightingale's song (Nasrin, 2008). This symbolic use of nature highlights both poets' ability to weave intricate layers of meaning into their work, making their poetry resonate on multiple levels (Kabir & Jamil, 2012).

After reviewing these studies, it becomes evident that both Frost and Keats use nature not only as a backdrop but as a central element that reflects and amplifies the human experience. The escapist tendencies in their poetry highlight their shared desire to transcend the limitations of reality and seek solace in the natural world (Suddard, 1912; Nasrin, 2008). This exploration of escapism through nature in their poetry provides a rich field for comparative analysis, revealing both the unique and overlapping aspects of their poetic visions. Thus, this study aims to delve deeper into the elements of escapism in selected poems of

Keats and Frost, providing a nuanced understanding of their approaches to nature and idealism.

### **Methodology**

This work is purely qualitative in nature as it deals with the explanation and discussion of the selected poems of John Keats and Robert Frost. While conducting this work, the researchers were interested to find out the elements of escapism as presented by the mentioned poets in their works. The primary source of data was the two poems namely "ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats and "Birches" by Robert Frost. The researchers utilized the technique of purposive sampling for the selection of the poems from both poets. After the selection of the samples, the techniques of close reading and thematic Analysis were adopted so to extract the elements of escapism from the selected texts. Moreover, Secondary data were extracted from various research articles for the purpose of reviewing relevant literature. After the comparative analysis, the Findings reveal that since both poets were dissatisfied in their lives, they sought release and deviation from this real world of actualities. It is evident from the poems that both of them were in search of some ideal and imaginary world where they could found spiritual solace and internal satisfaction.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **An Overview of Keats' Poem Ode to a Nightingale**

Keats in his poem "Ode to a Nightingale" wants to leave this dull world and the severe realities of this worldly life behind. He seeks escapism to some ideal world that is free from the harsh and tough actualities that he faces in this real world. He strongly desires to leave this world behind so that he may find solace and freedom from the so called "fever and the fret". It is evident from various lines of his Ode to a Nightingale that Keats through his escapism wants to reject the realities of life and seeks some Utopian world where there is perfection. Brooks (2018), comments in this connection that "The world of imaginations offers a release from the painful world of actuality, yet at the same time it renders the world of actuality more painful by contrast". Despite the fact that the imaginative world of Nightingale that Keats desires for, does not provide an everlasting world that can substitute

this real world still Keats desires to lost and merge his self and soul with that of nightingale for the time being.

The real cause of Keats' hopelessness in the world and his desire for an ideal and perfect world was that towards the end of his life in 1818, Keats went on a tour in Scotland and Northern England. On his coming back to his motherland, he was dedicated to take care of his brother Tom, who was diagnosed to be suffering from the fatal disease of Tuberculosis. Unfortunately, the poet himself was detected with the same disease in the autumn of 1819. Thus, this poetic work was produced in the coming spring of the same year. During that span of time, on the other hand, he had fallen in love with his lady Fanny Brawne. Consequently, he had fallen in great despair and grief due to the sudden demise of his brother along with his own physical ailments when he composed this poem (cited in Sahoo, 2018).

#### **Elements of Escapism as depicted in the poem Ode to a Nightingale**

The fact of his despair and frustration in this world is very clearly indicated in the opening lines of the poem "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains / One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk (Keats, 1819 L. 1-4). Here Keats asserts his internal pain and due to frustrations, he feels numbness in his senses as if he has drunk some intoxicating plants. Due to this numbness, he feels as if he has been sunk toward the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. In the next stanza, the poet wants to drink "a draught of vintage/ that hath been cooled a long age in the deep delved earth". Wines that have been kept in earth for a long age are, according to Greek mythology, more pure. Since the poet is in the state of dilemma and depression, thus he wants to take more pure wine so that he may be intoxicated. In the very next occurring lines, the poet wants to drink wine and leave this real world behind for an ideal world "That I might drink and leave the world unseen / and with thee fade away into the forest dim" (Keats, 1819 L. 19-20). In these lines, the poet desires to use the magic of wine and fly away with the nightingale towards some forest filled with trees.

Sahoo (2018 P. 263) in his work proclaims that Here the poet he wants to leave behind the world of black and white where he faced the harsh experiences, therefore he refers to the colorful wine as "O for a beaker full of the warm South, / Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene, / With beaded bubbles winking at the brink / And purple-stained mouth" (Keats, 1819 L. 15-18).

In the coming lines, the poet shares the worldly miseries, thus addresses the nightingale as "What thou among the leaves hast never known, / the weariness, the fever and the fret / Here where men sit and hear each other groan" (Keats, 1819 L. 22-24). Here the poet realizes, according to Sahoo (2018 p. 263), that the bird is unaware of the bitter and unforgiving realities of life as the nightingale has never experienced the weariness, the fever and the fret. The poet goes on to describes the world as a place "where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies; / Where but to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs, / Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow" (Keats, 1819 L. 25-30). The nightingale, according to Keats, as just like the god of tress who lives among the abundant trees and enjoys the life in thick forests without being aware of the tough responsibilities and actualities of worldly life of human beings. Keats wants to flee from this world because here there is no solace and satisfaction. Here people are in annoyed and irritated with each other. Here people lose control over their own body when palsy shakes them, and finally the die. Moreover, despair is personified with leaden eyes as the dwellers of this world are often hopeless and beauty cannot be remained "beyond tomorrow". Thus, the poet being tired and in sufferings, wants to drink a cup full of red wine and fly away with nightingale to some thick forest in order to find some relief in life.

After such desires of fleeing world with nightingale, the poet now wants to fly through the virtue of his verses. Thus, rejecting the power of wine he says "Away! Away! For I will fly to thee, / Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, / But on the viewless wings of poesy". The poet's wish of leaving this world behind now transfers from wine and nightingale to his poetry, despite the fact that "the dull mind perplexes and retards". The poet once again refers to the dull mind as it



has been corrupted by the miseries and suffering that he experienced in this real world. In the very next moment, the poet again imagining his soul a part of nightingale thinks about the beauty of queen moon that is clustered around by the stars. He also praises that moments as “already with thee! Tender is the night”.

Since the poet doesn't want to abandon the melodious songs of the bird, he appeals to the bird not to break the song even after he is no more in this world. “Darkling I listen; and for many a time / 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 forth thy soul abroad In such an ecstasy! / Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain (Keats, 1819 L. 51-59). Here the poet asserts that he is in love with easeful death that also refers to the strong wish of the poet for escapism. He even happily accepts death in order to get riddance of the harsh actualities of this real world life. Being too much exhausted from the fatigues and responsibilities of life, the poet asserts that he no more wants to live rather it seems rich to die but he wants an easeful death without any pain. Here again as the bird is unaware of the miseries, would continue his songs with ecstasy and delight but the poet would be unable to hear his harmonious songs.

### **Overview of Frost Poem Birches**

This poem by the American poet Robert Frost is basically nostalgic in which the poet desires for his youthful days when he used to swing by Birch trees. He seeks an escape from the grim realities of this world that one faces in adulthood life. Thus, he wants to leave these miseries behind and go for a while to enjoy the excitements of swinging and playing games of childhood. He wishes so because he knows that in childhood going through such games and swinging from a birch tree, he would find solace and a great internal pleasure in most of his boring times. When the poet sees bent trees of birch, he imagines at once that some boy like himself in childhood times must have bent them for swinging though he knows that in fact the trees have been bent by falling snow on them. Resultantly, his imaginations evoke which lead to

poet's meditations of how he used to swing from such birch trees in his youthful days. Finally, he becomes nostalgic and a strong wish of becoming a child again controls his mind. He wants to break the chains of restrictions and responsibilities of adult life and to get release from the grim realities of the world.

### **Escapism in Frost's poem Birches**

Like Keats, Frost's life was also full of pains and sufferings. In his adulthood, he lost his wife, son and daughter. Further, his passionate desire to win noble prize was never fulfilled. All such despairs make the poet's life miserable. These miseries result to remember him the early years of his childhood when he used to be free from anxieties and tension of responsible adult life. Here, in his poem “Birches” the scene of the trees recalls him his youthfup days when he used to play baseball over there. Here, ‘Baseball’ metaphorically refers to the youthful delights and pleasures of childhood days. As the birches symbolize life in this poem, the boy's climbing up them signifies journey of one's life in which everyone faces many experiences and learns new lessons.

Due to his sorrowful life, frost deeply connects himself as is evident in his poems to nature. Like Keats he tries to be in union with nature so that he may find solace and satisfaction and to forget the complexities of modern life. For this purpose, he ties his inner soul with the landscape and elements of nature so that he may find inner contentment for some time. Following Keats' notion about nature “A thing of beauty is a joy forever” Frost believes on the healing power of nature. Therefore, Frost also due to his fatigues and exhaustion of the worldly worries seeks some imaginary world where he is free of such dilemmas and responsibilities.

In his poem “Birches” Frost like Keats wishes to flee towards his life that he spent in his youthful days. When we open the poem, in the very beginning lines of the text it becomes clear that the poet wants to go once again to his delightful world of childhood. To express his desires for an ideal and imaginary life, Frost has used various literary techniques effectively. Thus, in the third line of the poem, he expresses his ideas by saying “I like to think some boy's been swinging them”. Here the boy is not actually present and has not

bent down the trees as the poet knows that the trees have been bent down by snow fallen on them. So the boy here symbolizes his youthful days when he was a child himself and used to swing on the birch trees. Thus by doing so, he used to get solace, pleasure and satisfaction if he would become bored. From here the poet starts recollecting his imaginations and meditates on them.

As it is mentioned before, the poet's life was full of miseries and worries, thus the feeling of pessimism can be seen through words used as symbols. Frost often uses storm as a symbol to refer to fear, danger and it represents the gloomy mood of the poet. Like other poems, here the poet uses the term storm as well. Subsequently, the poet referring to the bent down trees says that ice storm has caused them to bow down. Here the bending of the trees by the storm is also used as a symbol. Here storm used metaphorically, represents the worries of this world that have caused the poet himself to bow down. So just like the trees are loaded with snow, the poet also bears on his shoulders the load of sorrows and despairs. Resultantly, it is this burden of worries and uncertainties that compel the poet to seek escapism.

After the attractive description of the natural environment, the poet comes to the original point of focus that is again his imaginations. The poet refers to the boy who comes to fetch the family's cows, is supposed that he has bent down the trees. This young boy, the poet assumes, comes here from a far off town so to play baseball and to amuse himself by playing such games and swinging by birch trees.

"I should prefer to have some boy bend them / As he went out and in to fetch the cows- / Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, / Whose only play was what he found himself, / Summer or winter, and could play alone" (Frost, 1916 L. 23-27).

Here the imaginary boy who belongs to a far of town is an embodiment of the poet's feelings and imaginations. The boy like the poet own childhood days, comes here for entertainment and amusing himself through the whole year has gradually bent all the trees. Frost feeling nostalgic assumes that the boy bent down all trees as if trees belong to his father, subdued all of them. "One by one he subdued his father's trees / By riding them

down over and over again / Until he took the stiffness out of them" (Frost, 1916 L. 28-30). It means that in child hood one takes no care of anything even if things are others property but still enjoy them.

The poet again discusses the pleasure that the imaginary boy gets by swinging from the birch trees. Unaware of the actualities of this life, the boy after climbing the trees jumped and swung his legs freely in the air "Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish, / Kicking his way down through the air to the ground" (Frost, 1916 L.39-40).

Now the poet goes in imaginations to his childhood life "So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be. / It's when I'm weary of considerations, / And life is too much like a pathless wood / Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs" (41-45). In the next lines, a strong desire is aroused in the poet heart. The speaker assumes that it would be nice for him to escape earth for at least a bit of time "I'd like to get away from earth awhile". Frost further wishes to die by climbing a birch tree, scaling its dark branches and its snow covered trunk toward the heaven "I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree, / And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk / Toward heaven" (Frost, 1916 L. 54-56).

This escaping from earth and returning back, the speaker asserts, would be very nice. Thus in the closing lines of the poem, Frost like Keats wants death. Keats also wishes for an "easeful death" in his Ode to a Nightingale, similarly, Frost also love it to die at a time when he swings at birch tree and go to heaven.

### **Conclusion**

While conducting the present work, the researchers were interested to find out and compare the elements of escapism in poetic works of the selected poets i.e. Keats and Frost. After the comparative analysis of the purposively selected poems, the researchers came to the conclusion that both of the poets have amply desired to deviate from this world in order to get some satisfaction.

It is clearly pinpointed that both of the poets were the victims of sorrows, sufferings and thus were dissatisfied in their lives due to various social and cultural factors. Keats, for instance was not happy

because of his fatal ailment, the sudden death of his brother and wife. So he wants to leave this world of “weariness, fever and the fret” and to take shelter in some perfect ideal world “the world of the nightingale”. He wants to “drink and leave the world unseen” and desire to be united with the nightingale so to “fade away in to the forest dim”. He wants to loss himself and to be a part of the happy nightingale as according to his views, the nightingale is unaware of the so called “the weariness, the fever and the fret”. In this world, on the other hand, there are groans of men hearing to each other, a person loses control on his own body and thus dies miserably. “ What thou amongst leaves hast never known / the weariness, the fever and the fret / here where men sit and hear each other’s groan / where palsy shakes a few, sad, last, grey hair/ where but to think is to be full of sorrows”. This is a place, according to Keats, where beauty cannot remain for a long time and love also does not remain more than few moments “Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes / or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow”.

In such situations, Keats wants to drink wine and fly with the bird to some thick forest where he can find pleasure and satisfaction. In other instance he wants to escape from this world not by drinking wine but through “the viewless wings of his poesy”. Finally Keats appeals to nightingale to continue his melodious songs and strongly wishes to die at midnight.

Like Keats, Frost was also victim, of numerous sorrows and depressions in his life. He also wants to flee from the harsh realities of this world so to abandon the responsibilities of life. In his poem “Birches” when he sees the bent trees, he went back to his youthful life when he used to swing from such birch trees. Feeling nostalgic for the part life, he recalls how he used to play and swing without any worries. Resultantly, he once again intensely wishes to leave this world behind and to escape into that life again at least for a while. He

thinks to climb to the birch tree and then go straight to the heaven where he may find a release from the worldly worries. Like Keats, at the end of the poem, Frost also desires to die when he is swinging at the birch tree “I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree, / And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk / Toward heaven” In conclusion, the present work proves that both of the poets were in continuous struggle to find out an ideal world where there is perfection and is free from the worries and miseries unlike this real world of whites and blacks.

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