



## Apophysis Approach: Drawing Similarities in Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats and To a Skylark by P.B. Shelley and Challenging the Keats' Escapism

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### Abstract

Apophysis is a rhetoric device aimed at serving different purposes from the relationship between the speaker and the addressee to the mysticism. The understanding of this relationship may be direct and indirect. Keats' Ode to a Nightingale and Shelley's to a Skylark have never been explored from apophysis approach. The established notion of negative capability known as escapism from this world to the world of the song of nightingale as a distinctive feature of Keats poetry is challenged and replaced with the pure experience in this paper. This challenge is going to initiate a debate in future research. This paper also discusses the fact that despite similarity of experience in Keats' Ode to a Nightingale and Shelley's to a Skylark, the researchers and critics do not associate Shelley's to a Skylark to escapism. The apophysis approach is useful in drawing this similarity and develop an understanding of romanticism from the two song specific poems of these romantic poets.

### Keywords

Apophysis, Escapism, Nightingale, Skylark, Addressee, Speaker, Song and Mysticism.

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## Introduction

Poetry is a distinguished form of literature. It is an elucidation of life through imagination and feelings (Sharma, 2022). Reading a poem is a challenging task. Poems, time and again, challenge readers as well, asking them to interpret words, phrases, images, and symbols adjoined in striking ways (Pugh & Johnson, 2018). Ode as a form of poetry with Greek origin means to be recited and enjoyed through its music. This music abounds in Keats' *Ode to Nightingale* and Shelley's *to a Skylark*. The ode is often in the form of an address and apophasis approach takes into account the speaker and addressee on the theme indirectly.

This research contributes in using apophatic approach as a rhetorical device to trace the underlying meaning and relationship from the texts of *Ode to Nightingale* by Keats and *To a Skylark* by Shelley. In the poems under discussion, the specific knowledge is weighted with history. In *Ode to a Nightingale* and *To a Skylark*, the romantic poets share the extent of their shared knowledge. This extent of shared knowledge is an interesting area which needs to be explored. The main objectives of the Paper are: To reconstruct the apophasis as a theme of literature; to challenge the established notion of escapism in Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*; to analyze the text of Keats *Ode to a Nightingale* and Shelley's *to a Skylark* in the light of apophasis approach; to compare the extents of the shared knowledge in the texts of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* and Shelley's *to a Skylark*. Every research is aimed at finding answers to certain questions. So is true of this research. Specifically, this research will focus on finding answers to research questions: How can the apophasis approach be reconstructed for literary analysis? Can Keats' established escapism in the *Ode to a Nightingale* be challenged with a rational approach of experience? How can the text Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* and Shelley's *to a Skylark* be analyzed in the light of apophasis approach? Can the texts of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* and Shelley's *to a Skylark* be compared with regard to the extents of the shared knowledge?

Apophasis uses a "more precise inclusive and objective method of describing style than the impressionistic generalizations of traditional criticism" (Abdullayevna, 2022). Therefore, apophasis is a specific rhetorical device to understand the real and hidden intentions of the writer. This specialized use of language makes a literary text emotive, connotative and figurative.

Apophasis as approach is adopted from Latin which means repudiation. It finds a close association to the rhetoric Apophanai. Apo-means "away from" or "off," and phanai, stands for "to say." This rhetorical term has also got parallel in preterition and paraleipsis (Webster 2022). *In this way, this paper articulates that apophasis is a speaker's rhetoric device, a way of bringing a fact, an issue into the discussion through indirect ways. The divine reality it presents does not directly talk about God but through mysticism (Ackerman, 1919). The mystic example of apophasis resides in Moses and the burning bush. Moses and his colleagues are enchanted by the appalling heart-breaking beauty of God through burning bush (Panczová, 2022). Interestingly, Buddhist advocated the apophasis approach in the Buddha's own theory of anatta (not-atman, not-self). This denies the existentialism. Another philosophical Buddhist school of thought by Madhyamaka advocates a fourfold negation of all assertions and concepts. This school supports the theory of emptiness (shunyata) (Wynne, 2011).*

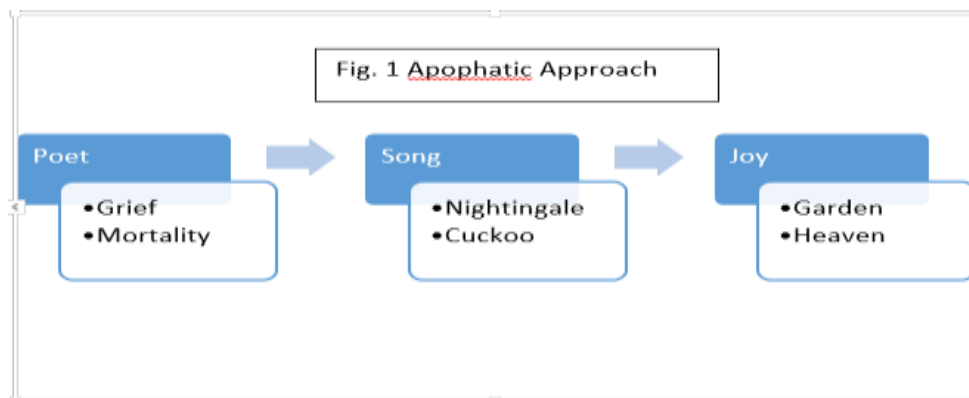
Plato had been a great admirer and supporter of apophatic approach when he was exploring and developing his theory of eternal change. Plato further discussed and elaborated Parmenides's idea of timeless truth presented in Parmenides. It focusses on *Truth, Beauty and Goodness*. To Plato, these are the basis for knowledge. Plato in *The Republic* extends this discussion, "real objects of knowledge are not the changing objects of the senses, but the form of the Good at the highest." Plato in the *Allegory of the Cave*, discusses humans. To him they are like prisoners in a cave with the ability to see shadows of the Real. Humans need to be educated for higher contemplation (Tabak, 2015). This contemplation may lead to intellectual understanding.

The term apophasis finds a better example in Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* when in Mark Anthony's burial speech on Caesar's death, he does not come up to praise or defend Caesar (Toscano, 2022). The critical theory known as deconstruction by Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida, is discussed with reference to negative theology (Savariyar, 2022). This has given rise to a recent newer interest in apophaticism. On the other hand, Derrida strongly negates the concept of negative theology. To him it is a form of ontotheology. This ontotheology is against deconstruction's image. In mystic India, The Principal Upanishads (800 BC to the start of common era) and the Brahma Sutras (from 450 BC and 200 AD) developed independently of Western thoughts are filled with apophatic themes. A better example of the negative theology is found in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Brahman, here is described as "neti neti" or "neither this, nor that". Apophatic theology can be traced in the Brahma Sutras: "Whenever we deny something unreal, it is in reference to something real (Brereton 1990)." Tagore in some of the Gitanjali songs uses the device of apophasis when describing himself as a vessel, flower, bird, etc. (Ray, 2022).

The foregoing discussions establish the use of apophatic approach as a rhetoric device from Greek and India in BC to Derrida.

Based on the understanding derived from the usage of apophatic approach, this paper develops a framework of apophatic approach. The framework looks at the direct and indirect relationship of speaker and addressee i.e. termed as explicit and implicit respectively. The framework will also take into account the mystic approach lying underneath the texts with the pure experience of the poet.

**Figure 1: Apophatic Approach**



Love for nature is explicitly and implicitly expressed in “Ode to a Nightingale” by Keats and “To a Skylark” by Shelley. This explicit and implicit expression is closer to apophasis approach as the poems are treated by giving permanence and spirituality through the songs of nightingale and skylark. This paper aims at making a concise textual analysis of these two poems by employing the apophasis approach by taking into consideration the speaker and the addressee, thematic dimensions, mysticism therein and the comparison of the birds and the plan of the poem. Words and verse lines are taken as qualitative primary data from these two odes for systematic qualitative analysis from apophasis approach for the first time.

The apophatic approach suggests an indirect relationship between speaker and addressee. This fact prevails in both the poems. Keats addresses the nightingale as a “light-winged Dryad” (line 7) and an “immortal Bird!” (Line 61), whereas Shelley addresses the skylark a “blithe Spirit!” (Line 1), and a “Sprite or Bird” (line 61). Here, it is interesting to note whether the poets are themselves attracted by the beauty of song or the song of the bird attracted them. The question is, whether did they hear these songs for the first time in their life or was it always there? The simple answer is that it was always there, but it is the specific circumstances of the poets that matter. These specific internal feelings led to this wonderful experience. It is in the specific situation, specific experience that both the poets find themselves enjoying the songs of birds. The nightingale is there in the garden and the skylark is there in the sky flying high. The common thing is both are singing and attracting the attention of the poets. This attraction is filled with joy whereas the world they live is full of sorrows. Both the poets deal with the universal themes of beauty, pleasure, sorrow, life and death in such a manner that they seem to be specific to the poets and when a reader is through the process, he experiences the same themes. Here, another question of importance whether the reader is passing through the similar experiences in real life. It may or may not be. In either case, the reader so engrossed in the beauty of the songs presented in the poem, in the universality of the appeal of the song that he experiences it. It is simply hard to go another way. The poets’ experiences are specific in the sense that they are in the specific situations, yet they are so general that the reader is taken into their world and goes through the experience – an enlightened experience.

The poets speak with respect and honor about the birds and they take the readers in the world of make belief. The nightingale was, is and will be present. Similarly, the skylark was, is and will be there. For past, Keats through apophatic approach makes us believe that the birds’ song was enjoyed by the common folks and “emperor and clown” (line 64; and that it will be heard hereafter. This transcendence of time expressed by Keats has in it the apophatic approach. Shelley presents the skylark as a “Sprite” (line 61). The bird flies high and is at times invisible. Therefore, quite rightly associated to the divinity. The common theme in both the odes is the idea of centrism on nature in the form of birds. In “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats finds happiness in the song of the bird. The bird is there. In the Skylark case, the bird is soaring and singing, which is interesting to the poet. The interest in both the cases lie in the happiness associated to the song. The speakers in both poems are so much impressed and absorbed in the songs of the birds that they experience a better world.

This experience is generally associated to transportation or negative capability in case of *Ode to a Nightingale* and not in case of *To a Skylark*. The researchers never compared the two poems from this angle. Whereas the experience is there, the experience of joy is there and comparison

with the world full of grief is there. Shelley addresses the bird, as to how so joyous. *Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight*, (Line 20). This paper takes into account Keats initial melancholic mood and then absorption in the songs of the nightingale as an experience just similar to that of Shelley. An experience through which the readers should pass. Giving it a title of transportation or negative capability is against the imagination and feelings of the poet. In our day-to-day life experiences, when something very serious is going with us are we are in a phase of shock and our thoughts stress on the trauma, we are experiencing. The psychologists, theologians, philosophers suggest to take a break from this continuous phase of shock. This break is never associated to escapism. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats break with that world of fever and fret through the song of the bird. This is purely an experience that breaks the traumatic momentum and is in no way escapism, as is claimed by a stream of researchers such as Bush (1960) and Brook (1939). This song is an experience to break the chord of grief and as such, not transportation. To forget the current strain is not an escapism, rather a way to get to a better place. The concept is also more close to the theory of diversion. Diverting attention from one object to the other. The song of nightingale serves a purpose and the purpose is to break the steam of trauma and nothing else. Associating it to escapism is beyond the theories of psychology, theology and philosophy.

The Keats concept of an ideal poet, who is like an empty vessel to be filled with some other potential being or object is quite close to Tagore's concept in *Gitanali*. Keats move through an experience of life and this experience he brings forth for the world to cherish. The apophysis approach helps in understanding this experience indirectly and takes the readers to those places and heights, which are quite closer to the experience of the poet. The truth associated to the beauty as a determining factor to establish Keats as a pure poet needs to be reached, experienced and enjoyed. This experience of attraction or moving attention from one thing to the other cannot be associated to transportation. This transportation to be accepted in the case of Keats and denied in the case of Shelley does not seem to appeal. Therefore, it is an experience to be experienced and to be communicated. This is what the poets have done in these odes. Keats in the Ode is in a melancholic mood and is drained away from this world of "fever and fret", "Away! away! for I will fly to thee" (line 31). This ode opens with "my heart aches" and in the next moment, he furthers, "My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk"(line 2). Shelley on the other hand opens the ode in a tone of wonder and joy filled with lyricism. The birds' ability to soar high and be lyrical, "Higher still and higher / From the earth thou springest" (lines 6-7). The bird is emblem of a pure joy- "unbodied joy whose race is just begun" (line-15). He accepts the supremacy of bird as a teacher, thinker, facilitator, player, etc. "Teach us, Sprite or Bird, /What sweet thoughts are thine" (lines 61-62). This thoughtfulness address to the bird is missing with Keats in his "Ode to a Nightingale".

In "Ode to a Nightingale" there exists a relation between ideal and actual (Fogle, 1953). This relation is central in this ode (Bush, 1960). The relationship between pain and joy is established. This paper negates this concept and calls it an experience. The two worlds of pain and joy presented in the poem are in existence at the same time. The world of pain is associated to human beings, where men sit and hear each other groan;/Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, /Where youth grow pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;/Where but to think is to be full of sorrow.

Whereas the world of joy is associated to the songs of nightingale, 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. The songs of nightingale are associated to the immortality and the pains of human beings are associated to the mortality. It is at this point the critics are deceived. This paper articulates that the pains are also there for all ages. Pain and joy are eternal features of existence. They are immortal. Whether the joy here is associated to the song or at any other place in the smile of an innocent child, it remains a joy. In "To a Skylark" Shelley establishes the joyous and lyrical tone right from the beginning as against Keats Ode to a Nightingale with a melancholic start. The poet expresses his profound love and honor for a skylark. Birds in both the poems are much more than the birds, they are embodiment of joy. Shelley listens the joyful song and the song is an expression of rosy life of the bird. There exists similarity with the song of nightingale, who has not experienced sorrows. This is common in both the poems. The skylark here is a symbol of divinity spreading joy; this joy can be understood by getting into the similarity of experience (Britannica, 2017).

The song of skylark, a natural outburst of the feelings of bird is understood, experienced and narrated by Shelley. It is a feeling, an experience, a joy and a lesson. Shelley in his specific mood brings about this experience to the world through his poetic thoughts to be enjoyed forever (Hebron, 2014). Sorrow and sufferings are essential part of this world, so are joys. Keats and Shelley recognize the tragedies and sufferings as compulsory part of human life, where mortality and longings prevail. The understanding of these phenomenon create great literature and poetry is no exception. The grand poetry embodies these mortalities, tragic conditions, sorrows, grieves, etc. of human life (Mambro, 2021).

Admittedly, the ode is historically related with references from Roman and Greek mythology. From apophatic approach, these references create a remarkable effect on readers, such as Flora and Bacchus, Lethe wards, Dryad and the Hippocrene. This joy embodies the purity and simplicity of nature at the same time (Shawa, 2015). Here Gadmer lines seem apt to be mentioned "The experience of the beautiful and particularly beautiful in art is the invocation of potentiality whole and holy order of things wherever it may be found." This is called mysticism from apophatic approach, as it is an indirect one. Both the poems contain mysticism and take reader from winding path to the eternal truth from apophatic approach. This melancholic tone finds rescue in mysticism associated to the music of song.

The title of both the poems "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To a Skylark" suggests the purity of song and life of the birds selected for expressing the exuberance of life. Their similarity in title and the expression of joy suggest that their genre is owed. The reading of "Ode to a Nightingale" clearly shows that it is composed in a garden, where he hears the song under a palm tree, "That thou, light winged Dryad of the trees / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless" (lines 7-9). As the song of the nightingale is no more, Keats is in a world where "forlorn...". This paper does not treat this dramatic change as escapism but as an experience. This experience actually breaks the earlier sad motion. Even in day-to-day conflict, when humans do not find resolution, one way of resolving the conflict is to take a break. This break has been provided by the song of birds, here. To this, this paper articulates as apophatic approach. On the other hand, in "To a Skylark", the bird is speaker and the poet is listener.

Listener is on the ground and the speaker is in heaven. This relationship refers to mysticism in the poem. With flying and singing as main action in the poem, the poet addresses the bird, "That from Heaven, or near it, / Pourest thy full heart" (lines 3-4). The bird is relishing in the sky "And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest" (line 10). Keats takes into account men, Shelley takes into account the land for drawing a mystic analogy under apophatic approach, "thou scorner of the ground!" (Line 100).

Apophatic approach finds an indirect relationship between speaker and the addressee. In this regard, figures of speech play a pivotal role to understand the direction of semantics. The implicit references help in beautifying the bare facts otherwise expressed explicitly. Figure of speech create a great influence from an ordinary form of expression (Wren & Martin, 1981). In "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats employs sound devices as alliteration, assonance with rhyme scheme. In To a Skylark, Shelley employs rhyme scheme.

This paper opens debates on apophatic approach and calls for attention of researchers to apply this approach on other pieces of work and genres of literature. It calls for attention to poetic experience gained in specific situation instead of established notion of escapism associated to *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats. It also draws attention of researchers to the griefs and happiness as features from unknown times. Associating griefs to human beings as mortal and happiness to songs of birds as immortal phenomenon is a wrong one and needs to be corrected. Bird is mortal like human beings. Griefs and happiness are universal whether associated to human beings or birds.

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