

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE SYMBOLISM OF THE
NIGHTINGALE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *ROMEO AND JULIET* AND
KEATS' "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE"**

UN ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO DEL SIMBOLISMO DEL RUISEÑOR EN
ROMEO Y JULIETA DE WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Y "ODA A UN
RUISEÑOR" DE JOHN KEATS

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ABSTRACT: This article conducts a comparative analysis of the nightingale's symbolism in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale." Despite differences in genre and historical contexts, both works depict the nightingale as a powerful symbol, exploring its connections to themes such as time, the urgency of love, escapism, and the tension between human suffering and transcendence. Employing the symbolic frameworks of Chevalier and Cirlot, alongside insights from Comparative Literature and Animal Studies, the paper illustrates how the nightingale bridges cultural and literary divides, reaffirming its timeless significance in literature.

KEYWORDS: English poetry, English drama, symbolism, nightingale, Comparative Literature.

RESUMEN: Este artículo realiza un análisis comparativo del simbolismo del ruiseñor en *Romeo y Julieta* de Shakespeare y “Oda a un ruiseñor” de Keats. A pesar de las diferencias de género y contextos históricos, ambas obras presentan al ruiseñor como un símbolo poderoso, explorando sus conexiones con temas como el tiempo, la urgencia del amor, el escapismo y la tensión entre el sufrimiento humano y la trascendencia. Utilizando los marcos simbólicos de Chevalier y Cirlot, junto con perspectivas de la Literatura Comparada y los Estudios de Animales, el artículo ilustra cómo el ruiseñor conecta divisiones culturales y literarias, reafirmando su relevancia atemporal en la literatura.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía inglesa, teatro inglés, simbolismo, ruiseñor, Literatura Comparada.

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INTRODUCTION

Birds have been a rich source of symbolism in literature throughout history, transcending cultural boundaries and time periods. Paraphrasing Hildegard von Bingen (2010) in her *Liber Subtilitatum* (circa 1150), birds symbolize the power that helps people to speak reflectively and leads them to consider matters in advance before they take action. Just as birds are lifted up into the air by their feathers and can remain wherever they wish, the soul in the body is elevated by thought and spreads its wings everywhere (p. 1). Be it their coveted ability to fly, beautiful plumage or melodious bird calls, these feathery creatures have fascinated writers who have immortalized their features across drama and poetry. In classical Greek tragedy, Sophocles' (2000) *Antigone* employs heavy bird imagery to foreshadow doom. The Chorus compares Polyneices to an eagle, signifying his threat

to Thebes and his ultimate downfall: “For a fight that Polyneices, haggling, picked. And, like a screaming eagle, he dropped on our land: The shadow of his white-snow wing” (pp. 111-114). The powerful simile here attributes the eagle warrior like features and Polyneices, a daredevil, animalistic quality. Whitman (1951) observes “The eagle, a potent symbol of power and aggression, reflects Polyneices’ fate and the impending tragedy” (p. 134).

Moving to the Renaissance, bird symbolism becomes even more refined. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, birds appear in various forms, often symbolizing the characters’ states of mind. For example, the crowing of the cock at dawn is said to dispel evil spirits, symbolizing the struggle between light and darkness, truth and deception:

Barnardo. It was about to speak when the cock crew.
Horatio. And then it started like a guilty thing,
 Upon a fearful summons; I have heard
 The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn
 Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
 Awake the god of day, and at his warning
 Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,
 Th’extravagant and erring spirit hies
 To his confine, and of the truth herein
 This present object made probation. (2009, pp. 8-9)

Here, the cock is symbolic of light. The “trumpet of the morn” metaphor envelops this bird in angelic-like features as his strident caw dispels all evil, casting unwanted spirits away. Harold Bloom (2009) discusses how “the cock’s crowing is a symbol of awakening and revelation, a harbinger of the truths Hamlet seeks to uncover” (p. 384). Contemporary to Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* also uses bird imagery to denote cunning and predatory instincts. Barabas, the protagonist, is often associated with birds of prey, emphasizing his ruthless and manipulative nature: “Since they are dead, let them be buried: For the Jew’s body, throw that o’er the walls, to be a prey for vultures and wild

beasts” (2009, p. 115). Robert A. Logan (2007) notes that “the imagery of birds of prey in Marlowe’s work highlights Barabas’s predatory disposition and his role as a manipulator within the play” (p. 102).

The use of bird imagery and symbolism in poetry is also quite prolific. Bird symbolism has been a rich and evolving theme in poetry, particularly before and during the Romantic era, leading into John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”. In the works of John Milton (2015), “Sonnet I: To The Nightingale” reveals a divine association of this bird in contrast to the ordinary cuckoo:

While the jolly Hours lead on propitious May,
Thy liquid notes that close the eye of Day,
First heard before the shallow cuckoo’s bill,
Portend success in love. O if Jove’s will
Have linked that amorous power to thy soft lay,
Now timely sing, ere the rude bird of hate
Foretell my hopeless doom, in some grove nigh;
As thou from year to year hast sung too late. (p. 55)

The speaker of the poem notices the ability of this bird to inspire warmth and joy and pleads him to sing in his favor. Critics like Helen Vendler (1985) discuss how Milton’s imagery reflects spiritual yearning, noting the deep connection between nature and the divine (p. 34).

Moving into the Romantic period, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” features the albatross, a clear symbol of fate and guilt. As evidenced in these lines, right after the speaker shoots the albatross:

And the good south wind still blew behind,
But no sweet bird did follow,
Nor any day for food or play

Came to the mariner's hollo!

And I had done a hellish thing,

And it would work 'em woe:

For all averred, I had killed the bird

That made the breeze to blow.

Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,

That made the breeze to blow! (1997, p. 312)

The guilt is quite evident as the persona of the poem laments the “hellish thing” (p. 312) he had done, as he attributes the albatross as being the creature who “made the breeze to blow” (p. 312). In fact, Northrop Frye (2005) analyzes the albatross as a representation of moral burden, indicating how birds in poetry often encapsulate complex human emotions (p. 293).

The abovementioned examples are clearly indicative of the variety of symbols birds have been attributed to in both drama and poetry, and the works of William Shakespeare and John Keats are no exception as they both share the nightingale as a quintessential symbol in their most celebrated works. This is evident in the bird's rich cultural and literary connotations, as well as its capacity to encapsulate central themes within each work. These small passerine birds are famous for their powerful songs, a subject of admiration in literary texts that can be traced back to the Greeks. In fact, nightingales have literature to thank for their current mythic status. As Michael Ferber (2007) explains:

The nightingale has had the most spectacular career of all literary birds. It has appeared in many thousands of poems from Homer to the twentieth century, and even in ancient times it acquired an almost formulaic meaning as the bird of spring, of night, and of mourning. Later, through its link to spring and night, it also became a bird of love. (p. 2)

It becomes evident, then, that nightingales have been attributed several features that contribute to the creation of a halo of mystery around them. Two works of literature that display nightingales with a highly symbolic meaning are the play *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) by William Shakespeare and the poem “Ode to a nightingale” (1819) by John Keats. Although different in genre and almost 300 years apart, these literary texts exhibit nightingales with certain symbolic similarities, as well as unique features that are quite interesting to consider when enhancing the connotative value of this bird. While both Shakespeare and Keats employ the nightingale as a symbol of the nighttime and its association with mortality, Shakespeare’s use emphasizes the urgency and fleeting nature of forbidden love, whereas Keats explores the nightingale as an emblem of escapism and the tension between human suffering and transcendence. These contrasting uses highlight the evolution of literary symbolism across historical periods, shaped by differing views on the role of nature and human existence.

1. THE SYMBOL: DEFINITIONS, APPROACHES AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A symbol, as defined in this study, transcends its literal representation to embody multifaceted meanings within its cultural and historical context. This article will specifically examine symbolism as it appears in two distinct periods and genres: Elizabethan drama and Romantic poetry. Literary symbolism in Elizabethan drama was a sophisticated tool that playwrights employed to convey themes, emotions, and societal critiques. In fact, symbols allowed dramatists to imbue their works with deeper meanings, often reflecting the cultural and religious milieu of the time. Paraphrasing Craig (1950), the tradition of symbolism in Elizabethan drama can be traced back to earlier forms such as morality plays, which were distinctive forms of drama that used allegorical characters to teach moral lessons. Understanding this tradition is important for comprehending the symbolic expressions in Elizabethan drama and Shakespeare’s works (p. 64).

Summarizing Fielding (2020), Elizabethan playwrights often illustrated political and social commentary within their works through symbolism. This allowed them to

critique or reflect on the society they lived in without overtly challenging the *status quo*, ensuring their messages could be conveyed to future audiences. Thus, it can be ascertained that, during the Elizabethan era, symbolism in plays served a dual purpose: to educate and/or caution the audience while simultaneously highlighting or critiquing social issues. William Shakespeare was no stranger to this effective use of symbolism. In the words of Dadwal (2023):

Shakespeare's symbolism is most easily understood when the historical and cultural context is known. Shakespeare's literary legacy is inextricably linked to the social and political climate of his day. Shakespeare's plays are rich with symbolism, but to fully grasp their significance, one must immerse oneself in the complex fabric of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, during which Shakespeare lived and created his extraordinary works. (p. 58)

During the Elizabethan era, the natural world was often perceived in light of order and hierarchy, which clearly reflected the prevalent societal structure. Elizabethans believed in The Great Chain of Being, in the words of Collins (2001): "a cosmic order beginning with God at the top and descending down through the angels to mankind, the King, his subjects, the animal kingdom, the plants, the earth, and ending in Hell" (p. 1). This rigid belief system attributed a role and place to everyone and everything in society warning them not to stray as that would wreak havoc and disrupt the so-called natural order.

In this context, nature was seen as the epitome of divine order and harmony. This perspective is evident in several of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* being no exception. The nightingale's birdcall, signaling the transition from night to day, symbolizes the natural rhythm and order of the world. This natural order stands in stark contrast to the impulsive, forbidden love between the two star-crossed lovers. Even in its deeply passionate nature, their love disrupts the familial, and therefore societal, order. This is mirrored in their longing for more time together in the nightingale scene –which indicates how this action would disrupt the natural progression from night to day.

While Elizabethan playwrights harnessed symbolic imagery into their works to explore universal truths and social commentary, Romantic poets, with a renewed emphasis on individual emotion and the power of nature, employed symbolism to delve into the depths of the human psyche as well as the mysteries of the natural world. Goethe's canonical definition of the symbol formulates the idea of the particular as representing "the universal, not as a dream or shadow, but as a living and momentary revelation of the inscrutable" (1969, p. 523). In *Lay Sermons*, Coleridge (1972) also discusses the feature of representation "by a symbol, I mean, not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents" (p. 79). This strictly relates to the "nature" of the Romantic symbol as explained by Halmi (2007):

On the one hand the symbol was supposed to be the point of contact between the contingent and the absolute, the finite and the infinite, the sensuous and the super-sensuous, the temporal and the eternal, the individual and the universal. On the other hand, it was supposed to refer to nothing but itself, so that image and idea were inherently and inseparably connected in it. (p. 2)

To recapitulate, Goethe's concept of the symbol highlights its dynamic and ever-evolving nature, reflecting the transient and elusive qualities of both inner and outer realities. Coleridge further emphasizes the symbol's unique function, distinguishing it from mere metaphor or allegory. He posits that the symbol is not merely a representative image but an integral and inseparable part of the whole it signifies. This aligns with Halmi's observation that the Romantic symbol bridges the gap between the finite and the infinite, the sensuous and the super-sensuous. By embodying both particularity and universality, the symbol offered a means of accessing deeper truths and experiencing the transcendent within the mundane.

In contrast to the Elizabethan era, the Romantic period, during which Keats wrote "Ode to a Nightingale", placed a strong emphasis on emotion, individualism, and the

sublime beauty of nature. As stated by Hamilton (2016), “This movement directly criticized the Enlightenment’s position that humans can fully comprehend the world through rationality alone, suggesting that intuition and emotion are key components of insight and understanding” (p. 170). Romantics viewed nature not merely as a canvas for human activity, but as a source of inspiration, spiritual awakening, and a means to access deeper truths about human existence. This era elevated the individual’s emotional response to the natural world and often flirted with themes of transcendence and the tension between the temporal and the eternal. Keats’ use of the nightingale in his ode showcases these Romantic ideals as the nightingale’s song becomes a symbol of transcendent beauty and immortality, contrasting with the speaker’s sense of burdening mortality and the transient nature of humans. Keats’ nightingale is able to exist in a timeless realm, a kind of heterotopic forest that provides an escape from the fleetingness of life. The bird’s song inspires an emotional response in the speaker, thus illustrating the Romantic belief in the power of nature to evoke transformative feelings.

Overall, the cultural contexts of the Elizabethan and Romantic eras played a part in how Shakespeare and Keats utilized the nightingale as a symbol. Therefore, the proposed definition of a symbol for this paper considers symbolism a potent literary device that transcends mere representation. In both Elizabethan drama and Romantic poetry, it takes the role of a bridge between the particular and the universal. While Elizabethan drama often employed conventional symbols within a more structured framework, Romantic poets embraced a more fluid and personal approach. Still, the symbol offers a glimpse into the inscrutable depths of human experience and the mysteries of the natural world. Unlike allegory, where meaning is derived from external correspondences, the symbol operates on an intuitive level, fusing image and idea into an inseparable whole. This inherent self-referentiality allows the symbol to unify the finite and infinite, the temporal and eternal, and the sensuous with the super-sensuous. Consequently, the symbol is not merely an illustrative device but an integral component of the artistic expression itself, enriching the work with layers of meaning and inviting contemplation.

2. METHODOLOGY

Thinking of a symbol in terms of merely a literary element would be to minimize its existence and a serious error, since symbols are part of the everyday life; as reflected in history, religion, and literature. Throughout history, thinkers, critics, and psychologists have conducted studies on symbology. Among the most noted psychologists, Carl G. Jung and his studies on symbols and archetypes in *Man and His Symbols* (1964) proposed a detailed analysis of symbolism both in the quotidian and in dreams. Peter L. Berger, who related symbols to the values and lifestyles of ordinary people in their everyday existence in *Introduction to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (1963), also contributed to the development of symbology.

A symbol represents something abstract, something intangible. For the purpose of achieving a specific focus, the methodology of this article will draw upon the studies by Jean Chevalier (1996) and Juan Eduardo Cirlot (2001), as reflected in their respective dictionaries of symbols. Summarizing Chevalier, the symbol is more than a mere sign: it transcends meaning, requires interpretation, and this needs a certain predisposition; it is charged with affectivity and dynamism (p. 19). Cirlot states that each symbol has value both for what it is in itself and for the interpretive value assigned to it (p. 12). Everything can possess symbolic value, “whether natural (stones, metals, trees, fruits, animals, rivers and oceans, mountains and valleys, plants, fire, lightning, etc.) or abstract (geometric shape, number, rhythm, idea, etc.)” (p. 22).

Chevalier’s studies also present nine functions of the symbol. These include Exploratory, Substituting, Mediating, Unifying Forces, Pedagogical/Therapeutic, Socializing, Resonance, Transcendent, and Transformative. The first seven functions will be explained, since they are the most relevant to this article and applicable to the field of literature. The exploratory function implies that the symbol reveals and manifests what is often difficult to understand on its own. Chevalier explains that we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot understand or define (p. 25). In

this way, the symbol builds a bridge between the incomprehensible and our human reasoning, allowing us to begin to understand the abstract concept to which it refers.

The Substituting function refers to what is represented by the symbol as everything one cannot, should not, or is not ready to say or express (p. 26). Hence the word substituting, which in this case is loaded with a significant dual meaning: what is being substituted and the symbol chosen to do so. The next function, the symbol as Mediator, is closely related to the previous one. Symbols create relationships between other symbols and everything surrounding the symbol in question (p. 26). For Unifying Forces, Chevalier considers the fundamental symbols that surround humanity, whether religious (cross), cosmic (moon), social, or psychic, explaining that they link humans with the rest of the world (p. 27). Thus, thanks to the symbol and what it represents, humans can connect and create associations between the symbol and the universe.

The Pedagogical/Therapeutic function is quite self-explanatory. Chevalier notes that through this function, the symbol provides a sense of belonging, identification, or participation to those who unveil it. If it is considered that a civilization that no longer has symbols dies and only belongs to history (p. 28), according to Chevalier, the Socializing function classifies certain symbols within a period or belonging to a certain group of people. Each era and civilization have its symbols that, when studied and understood, allow us to have a greater approximation to that specific time and people. Finally, Resonance distinguishes between living and dead symbols. Chevalier explains that there are certain symbols that only hold significance in history because, in the present, they lack the same vibrancy they had in that specific context (p. 28). It is important, therefore, in a study of symbols, to discern whether the symbols considered are still relevant or if they represented something in the past that now lacks resonance.

To conduct a more detailed exploration of the symbol of the nightingale, this article will also incorporate the works of Adamson et al. (2000), as well as insights from the field of Animal Studies regarding the symbolic meanings attributed to birds. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a more well-rounded, integral analysis on the

symbolism of the nightingale. In *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language* (2000), Adamson et al. draw attention to the importance of metaphors in the playwright's work being categorized in a highly symbolic light. The authors provide readers with a comprehensive insight into how Shakespeare employs metaphors to enhance his characters and narratives through detailed analysis and interpretation. This work not only categorizes and explains Shakespeare's metaphors but also situates them within their cultural, historical, and literary contexts. One particular metaphor is that of light and darkness/day and night, conveyed by the symbolism of the two birds, the lark and the nightingale, respectively. This interpretation is also expressed in Duncan-Jones' (2010) work: "The use of light and darkness as symbolic elements in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* effectively conveys the inherent duality present in themes of love and conflict" (p. 66).

The analysis of the nightingale in these two works will be further explored through the lens of the interdisciplinary field of Animal Studies since this approach allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural, ecological, and symbolic meanings of animals intersect in literature. In *Literature and Animal Studies*, Ortiz Robles (2016) argues that "Animal Studies [...], the discipline within the humanities best equipped to account for the figurative character of our engagement with the world, can tell us something valuable about animals that we would otherwise ignore" (pp. ix-x). In fact, the author explains how animals have always been present in literature, yet, marginalized in its analysis and consideration. There lies the importance of Animal Studies as a field, since, in the author's own words, "animals become the privileged presences that show us how to be human" (p. 2) and "our conception of animals has changed drastically over time and continues to vary significantly from one culture to the next" (p. 5), thus highlighting the need to explore the dynamic symbolism of animals.

In the online article "Comparative Literature and Animal Studies", Ortiz Robles (2015) also notes the historical depth of animal representations: "The representation of animals is as old as representation itself," and "their use in literature remains a powerful tool for understanding the interplay between humans and the natural world". Additionally, he asserts that "To compare animals to texts could well advance the cause of literary

studies by giving a new purchase on what comparison might signify for students of literature around the world”. When framing the analysis of animals as a literary invention, Animal Studies challenges us to reconsider the boundaries between human and non-human worlds and their intersections in cultural production. By examining the nightingale from this perspective, the study can uncover how its representation reflects not only human emotions and themes but also broader relationships between humans and the natural world, adding a richer dimension to its literary significance.

Specifically pertaining to birds in the scope of Animal Studies, in *Birds and other creatures in Renaissance Literature*, Bach (2018) asserts that “birds were also seen as moral creatures” (p. 2) and “that writers may have been especially aware of, and concerned with, birds since writers produced their work using bird feathers as pens and conceived of writing as imaginative flight” (p. 14). This distinction made between birds and other species in terms of moral beings only stresses the symbolic importance of such species and the need to understand said meanings. Again, this inherent connection is also conveyed in the works of Chilean scholar Paula Baldwin (Dec. 17th 2021), as expressed in an interview in *Letras en Línea*:

Estoy convencida de que hay textos que se nutren y enriquecen al ser comparados, pues no quedan como una manifestación aislada –valiosa, por cierto–, de una temática que atañe a la vida de las personas, sino que se unen al análisis y a las perspectivas que otros autores han elaborado a lo largo del tiempo. Por los alcances antropológicos del vuelo y del canto de las aves, simbólicamente asociadas al alma, al lenguaje poético y a las figuras del poeta y del sabio, entre otros, me pareció que el tema se prestaba muy bien para buscar significados comunes en el marco del género lírico.¹

¹ “I am convinced that there are texts that are nourished and enriched through comparison, as they do not remain isolated manifestations –still valuable, of course– of a theme that pertains to human life, but instead become part of the analysis and perspectives that other authors have developed over time. Given the anthropological significance of flight and birdsong, symbolically associated with the soul, poetic language, and figures such as the poet and the sage, among others, I felt that the topic lent itself well to seeking common meanings within the framework of poetry” (own translation).

The quote highlights the symbolic significance of birds, connecting them to themes like the soul, poetry, and wisdom. Baldwin emphasizes that comparing texts enriches our understanding, since birds' flight and song resonate with universal human experiences across time, especially in lyrical poetry. This view suggests that bird symbolism is deeply intertwined with human culture and should be explored beyond mere distinctions between species. In fact, this idea is further explored in Baldwin's work: *Remontar el Vuelo* (2021) where she explains how avian metaphors, symbols and imagery serve as counterpoints to humanity. Finally, it becomes relevant to zoom-in in the importance that Baldwin gives to the comparison and contrast of texts since this article is of a comparative nature.

In this way, the ideas of Armando Gnisci (2002) in terms of comparative literature are essential. In *Introducción a la literatura comparada*, the author writes:

[...] como una poética grande y plural. Es así como presentamos la literatura comparada en este volumen, y no como una especialidad de la ciencia literaria académica, o como una caja de herramientas metodológicas para rodear, agredir y analizar, abordar, focalizar y explicar el texto literario. (p. 14)²

Here, Gnisci seeks to challenge the idea of the literary text as isolated and specialized discourse. Instead, he proposes integrating it as a point of convergence for worlds through which we might come to understand one another in diversity. By comparing a scene from an Elizabethan play to a Romantic lyrical poem in terms of the significance of the nightingale, readers can trace similarities and differences in how this symbol's meanings align or diverge across space, time, and cultural contexts. This analysis aims to demonstrate that symbolism remains vibrant and transcends time periods and genres.

² “[...] as a grand and plural poetics. This is how we present comparative literature in this volume, not as a specialty of academic literary science, nor as a toolbox of methodologies to surround, assault, and analyze, approach, focus on, and explain the literary text” (14) (own translation).

To summarize, Chevalier's functions of symbols will be considered during the close reading of *Romeo & Juliet's* Act III Scene 5 and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", paired with the abovementioned ideas on Animal Studies. This will provide a structured framework for analyzing how the symbol of the nightingale operates within these texts, allowing for a deeper understanding of its thematic and emotional significance.

3. ANALYSIS

The nightingale, and its counterpart, the lark, play a crucial role in indicating the temporal contrast in *Romeo and Juliet*. In this play, time is of the essence since its plot is "compressed into a matter of days" (Tanselle, 1964, p. 349). In Act III, Scene 5, set in the Capulets' home, Romeo and Juliet debate over whether it's night or day by means of these two birds who effectively become symbols of the parts of the day:

JULIET: Wilt thou be gone? it is not yet near day:

It was the nightingale, and not the lark,

That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear;

Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate-tree:

Believe me, love, it was the nightingale. (Shakespeare, 2003, pp. 159-160)

Juliet's words clearly show the contrast between the nightingale and the lark by stating it was the nightingale that sang, meaning it is still dark out there and she can remain with her love. In fact, Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996) confirm this symbolism by stating that the nightingale is opposed to the lark, the "messenger of dawn" (p. 2266) and symbol of the separation of these two lovers. Therefore, it becomes evident that the nightingale symbolizes the nighttime "nightly she sings on yon pomegranate-tree"³ marking the temporal contrast that characterizes the play.

³ "The pomegranate tree was typically associated with the nightingale, though it was the male that did most of the singing, Dowden suggests that the common reference to 'she' arose from the Ovidian tale of Tereus and Philomela, who was turned into a nightingale" (Evans, 1969, p. 218).

Romeo and Juliet is a literary work heavy on contrasts: there's either passionate, undying love or banishment and death; there are intricate solutions to hyperbolic problems or devastating consequences stemming from impulsive decisions, and this scene is no exception. For these lovers, there are no in-betweens. It is either the shadowy refuge of night, or the deadly exposure of early morning, and, naturally, Shakespeare chose to show this through these birds and their characteristic birdcalls. To paraphrase Chevalier and Gheerbrant, if these young lovers rely on the nightingale they will remain together, but with a constant target on their backs; whereas, if they choose to believe it was the lark's song that they've heard, they might live, but at the expense of a lifetime apart (p. 2267). Drawing on the Exploratory function of symbols, the nightingale's presence reveals the lovers' desire for secrecy and intimacy, contrasting with the harsh reality symbolized by the lark. Chevalier's framework enhances our understanding by framing the nightingale not just as a bird but as a mediator of unspoken desires and fears. Juliet's reliance on this bird to signify night reflects the Mediating role of the symbol, connecting the abstract concept of time with the tangible emotional stakes for the lovers. Temporal contrast, then, is efficiently shown in *Romeo and Juliet* through the symbolism of the nightingale as the bearer of dusk, which goes in line with the meaning evoked in Keats' poem as well.

In similar fashion, "Ode to a nightingale" presents a direct association of this bird with the nighttime. By means of a shift in tone in the fourth stanza, signaled by the anaphora of the adverb "Away!" (Keats, 1977, p. 678), the speaker "flies" to a realm of shadows where "the Queen-Moon is on her throne / Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays / But here there is no light" (p. 678). The fact that the moon is on her throne, and the speaker is in a place with no light seems to suggest that, on this particular night, there is a new moon. This would explain the absence of any light, not even moonlight, which further heightens the pitch-black color of the night. Leaving no room for doubt, the seventh stanza explicitly addresses the night as the specific time when the nightingale sings: "The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown" (p. 679). Keats' careful choice of diction also stresses the connection between the nightingale and the nocturnal hours, as well as the universality of its birdcall since both

royalty (the emperor) and peasantry (the clown) were privy to its music. In line 20, the speaker wishes “to fade away into the forest dim”, thus creating a visual image that evokes a sense of the forest being shrouded in darkness or low light. Line 35 suggests the night is “tender”, placing the speaker in time (night) and place (forest). Finally, line 51 features Keats’ use of the word “darkling”, a combination of dark and darling, which further emphasizes the references to the night hours. The choice of this word also brings forth an interesting coincidence, as one of the earliest recorded uses of “darkling” in English literature can be found in Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*⁴.

Through the lens of Animal Studies, the nightingale transcends its avian identity to symbolize broader existential themes. Adamson’s et al. (2000) interpretation of Shakespearean metaphors highlights the symbolic interplay of light and darkness in *Romeo and Juliet*, a duality also prominent in Keats’ exploration of immortality and human suffering. The interdisciplinary approach allows for a richer analysis: in Keats’ poem, the bird’s song is not just an auditory experience but a moral and emotional touchstone, representing an eternal escape from the weariness of human life. Unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, that presents a lark to contrast the nightingale, this poem has no bird counterpart which makes the symbolic association to darkness and night quite stronger. Moreover, temporal contrast is also present in terms of binary oppositions, such as the immortality of the bird’s song vs. the fleeting human existence: “What thou among the leaves hast never known / The weariness, the fever, and the fret” (Keats, 1977, p. 677). Here, the speaker clearly conveys that the nightingale is completely unaware of the pangs of humanity, such as growing old and being ill. Overall, in both texts, the nightingale serves as a powerful symbol of the nighttime, emphasizing the temporal contrasts that drive the narratives forward. These two literary texts show a direct association of the nightingale

⁴ In *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare*, White (1987) argues that Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” is richly saturated in Shakespeare, with assimilations so profound that it remains original, and wholly Keatsian. Also, Spiegelman (1983) notes that Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* influenced the poem, stating that the play “flavored and ripened the later poem” (p. 348).

to the nighttime by means of contrasting this bird to another one, as is the lark in *Romeo and Juliet*; or word choice and binary oppositions as in “Ode to a nightingale”.

The reference to the nightingale in Act III, Scene 5, of *Romeo and Juliet* substantiates key themes that resonate throughout the entire play, notably those pertaining to time, the tragic consequences of impulsive, youthful love, and the inevitability of mortality. As mentioned earlier, this is a play where time is of the essence, since the two lovers meet, fall in love, get married, are separated and then die in only a matter of days. In this particular scene, Juliet’s desire for it to be the nightingale’s song and not the lark the one she’s heard contributes to the theme of time passing swiftly, and mercilessly. These two lovers seem to be always rushing, which forces them to be on a constant state of anxiety, and an inability to enjoy the, unbeknownst to them, very little time they have together. In the words of Marjorie Garber (2005): “Romeo and Juliet are continually pressed by the sense of urgency. Their actions are marked by a desperate need to accelerate events, compressing a lifetime of experience into a few short days” (p. 194). This is why Juliet so desperately yearns for it to be the nightingale, since this would mean they have a full night to spend together before Romeo parts: “I must be gone and live, or stay and die” (Shakespeare, 2003, p. 160). It is this sense of haste that Bloom (1998) explores: “The lovers’ frantic haste is driven by the knowledge that time is not on their side. The constant references to time create an atmosphere of impending doom, as they are aware that each moment together could be their last” (p. 22).

This evidences Chevalier’s Substituting function of the nightingale’s song. The bird’s nocturnal presence substitutes the lovers’ spoken fears about their precarious situation. Juliet’s plea for the nightingale’s song over the lark’s stresses her wish to delay the inevitable separation. Chevalier’s Pedagogical/Therapeutic function also applies, as the nightingale’s symbolism provides the lovers a fleeting sense of belonging and safety within their doomed narrative. This is further corroborated by the tragic foreshadowing in Juliet’s lines: “to be to thee this night a torch bearer” (Shakespeare, 2003, p. 160), a metaphor loaded with impending finality. A similar yearning for the night never to end, yet different in its context is evoked in “Ode to a nightingale” where the speaker does

not wish for his ethereal trance to end because that would mean he has to return to the real world.

Probably one of the main themes in *Romeo and Juliet*, the consequences of impulsive, adolescent love, is also explored in the nightingale scene by means of the conversation between the two lovers and their extreme reactions. Since these are two adolescents, every interaction they have is heightened by their feelings on edge and impulsivity, and the hearing of the nightingale's birdcall is no exception. As Nuttall (2007) claims: "The impetuosity of Romeo and Juliet is a hallmark of their youth. Their swift decisions and passionate responses typify the impulsive nature of adolescent love" (p. 134). Juliet argues for the nightingale's song, whereas Romeo is sure he's heard the lark, the latter being symbolic of deadly consequences. Romeo's hyperbolic remark in line 17 "let me be be ta'en, let me be put to death" (p. 160) also reveals the theme of impulsive love to perfection. A simple argument on which bird is singing has unveiled the emotional nature of these two characters that are desperate to be together against all odds.

A final theme the presence of the nightingale also heightens is that of mortality. Once the nightingale stops his song, this means morning has come, and with it, the realization that Romeo is a wanted man that will meet his end if found. Therefore, the cloak of night, indicated by this bird, is only temporary as is life on earth: "Romeo: More light and light; more dark and dark our woes!" (Shakespeare, 2003, p. 161). The nightingale here acts as a reminder that, if it is night, there is still time for the lovers to be together, but it will pass as everything does. On the other hand, if the lark is the bird that is singing, daylight is already here and mortality is more evident than ever before. As explained by Evans (1969): "As the nightingale sings, it emphasizes the contrast between the ephemeral night and the life-threatening day. This song is a subtle yet powerful symbol of the mortality that shadows Romeo and Juliet's love" (p. 123).

There seems to be no rest for these two lovers and their desire to simply celebrate their love. Shakespeare's word choice must also be noted in this scene, where, together with the symbolism of the nightingale, foreshadows the tragic ending, thus contributing

to the theme of mortality. The play on words with “pierced” in line 3 when Juliet makes reference to the bird song is reminiscent of being pierced with a dagger, thus foreshadowing the final scene. Romeo’s indication of “severing clouds” (p. 160) coming from the east, “night candle’s [being] burnt out” (p. 160), and the “misty mountain tops” (p. 160) are all indicative of an impending doom. Finally, Juliet’s remark in line 14: “to be to thee this night a torch bearer” (p. 160) is highly evocative of Romeo’s torch bearing when descending to Juliet’s resting place. In this way, the presence of the nightingale is also effective in highlighting some of this play’s central themes, such as time, the consequences of impulsive love, and mortality; some of which are also key in Keats’ celebrated poem.

In “Ode to a nightingale”, the bird is also significant in revealing the themes of time and mortality, as well as the theme of escapism from the hardships of human existence. The very first stanza already places the speaker in a sort of soporific trance as he is transported to the realm of the nightingale, which seems to defy all rules governing time as one knows it. The allusion to “Lethe” in the fourth line suggests the speaker has drunk from the water of this river and succumbed into forgetfulness as he travels to the dark forest where the nightingale’s song seems to be coming from. The passing of time is also referenced again in the third stanza, where the speaker reveals how agonizing it is to face old age: “Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs” (Keats, 1977, p. 677). As seen in Act III, Scene 5, of *Romeo and Juliet*, nighttime is clearly the setting in time of this poem, specifically “midnight” as mentioned in line 65. This goes in line with the nightingale’s symbolism of being a bird of the dark hours.

References to time as a central theme are also evident in the last stanza of the poem when the speaker is catapulted back to reality and, as he retraces his steps, he clearly sees that which was shadowy or blurry before because it was dark. The “near meadows”, the “still stream”, and the “valley glades” (p. 680) pass swiftly before his eyes as he comes back from his slumber and wonders whether he is still sleeping, dreaming or awake. It seems that the further the speaker got from the nightingale’s song, the clearer everything was, as if referencing daylight or some type of dreaded awakening. This is also consistent with the theme of mortality, since the passing of time also indicates the unavoidable

coming of death. In the word of Stillinger (2006): “the nightingale [...] sings of an immortal realm, and this singing serves as a stark reminder to the speaker of his own mortality and the inevitable decay that accompanies human life” (p. 131).

Using the nightingale as a symbol of the eternal, while human life is portrayed in a fleeting, filled with suffering light, Keats explores the theme of mortality in depth. As the poem opens, these two lines address such a theme by means of heavy, painful imagery: “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk” (Keats, 1977, p. 676). These lines express the idea that the speaker’s heart aches because he is aware of the fleeting nature of life, and he longs to avoid the pain and suffering of the mortal world by joining the eternal song of the nightingale: “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird! (p. 679). Again, mortality is referenced in the very last stanza: “Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!” (p. 680). The word “forlorn” serves as a reminder of the speaker’s own mortality, pulling him back from the enchantment of the nightingale’s song to the reality of his finite existence. As well, the verb “toll” is also indicative of bells tolling during funerals which add to the macabre of the theme in itself. Like in *Romeo and Juliet*, Keats’ nightingale is also closely related to the binary oppositions of mortality/immortality, although in this poem the theme is presented less matter-of-factly and with a philosophical twist, thus constituting a contrast with the scene from the play. Another evident difference lies in Keats’ more “imaginative” approach versus Shakespeare’s direct symbolism. In the words of McGann (1983), “Keats’s aesthetic ideas were in constant flux, and they have a purely circumstantial relation to the development of his artistic skill” (p. 135). This adaptability reflects how Keats uses the nightingale to navigate themes of mortality and immortality, contrasting with Shakespeare’s more direct symbolism in *Romeo and Juliet*.

A final theme that is only evident in the poem, is the theme of escapism from the pain of human existence. Summarizing Vendler (1985), in “Ode to a Nightingale”, Keats expresses a profound yearning for escape from the sorrows of human existence through the transcendent and immortal song of the nightingale. The bird’s song becomes a means of temporary release from the burdens of reality (p. 89). Since the very beginning of the

poem, the speaker seems to carry an invisible burden that he wishes would disappear. Such is his weight and Keats' magnificent imagery and diction, that the reader can vividly feel, see and touch this burden. The speaker mentions his heart aching, a drowsy numbness, and a "dull brain that perplexes and retards" (Keats, 1977, p. 678), all of which seem to be standing in the way between his coveted immortality in the form of the nightingale and his birdcall. His desire to escape is so strong that, in stanza 5, he cannot even see what lies at his feet, and is still ecstatic about it because he has flown to this realm of forgetfulness.

The nightingale in *Romeo and Juliet* and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" symbolizes crucial themes of time, mortality, and impulsive love. In Shakespeare's play, the bird shows the fleeting nature of time, the consequences of youthful passion, and the inevitability of death. Juliet's wish for the nightingale's song over the lark's highlights the urgency and brevity of her love with Romeo, reflecting their desperate and impulsive actions. Similarly, Keats' nightingale represents an escape from the harsh realities of human existence, with its song symbolizing a timeless, immortal realm. The nightingale's eternal song contrasts the speaker's mortal suffering, emphasizing the transient nature of life and the desire to transcend it. Here, Chevalier's Unifying Forces function becomes apparent in the speaker's yearning to merge with the bird's eternal song, a desire that reflects the universal human longing for transcendence. According to McGann (1983), "the contradictions of an escape into poetry –the impulse to attempt such an escape as well as the impasse which it must reach– define the work" (p. 122). The nightingale thus serves as both a vehicle for escape and a reminder of inevitable limitations. These works use the nightingale to explore deep existential themes, though in different contexts and tones, revealing the bird's versatile symbolic power. In essence, both texts effectively show the nightingale as contributing to their main themes, which, although varying at times, do have similarities in terms of the central elements of time and mortality.

A final aspect to be considered in the chosen texts involves the use of tone. In *Romeo and Juliet's* scene, the tone is one of romantic and youthful passion, lacking the form and formality one would expect in those times making their love and interaction a

realistic one. As stated by Draper (1948): “the dramas of Shakespeare, therefore, as realistic dialogue and also as poetry and as wit, should be, and are, rich in stylistic heightening” (p. 195). Romeo and Juliet, the two young lovers, are on Juliet’s balcony, and Romeo overhears Juliet speaking about her love for him. Here, the tone is characterized by passionate love as they both express their deep affection for each other, and their words are filled with intense emotion: “Juliet: Wilt thou be gone? it is not yet near day” (p. 159). This quotation clearly shows Juliet’s intense desperation at the thought of parting with Romeo yet again. Such intensity also seems to convey a tone heavy in euphoria and elation in their interactions. Their language is lyrical and filled with metaphors and hyperbole that emphasize the intensity of their feelings. For instance, when Juliet mentions “the meteor that the sun exhales” (p. 160), or Romeo’s “the vaulty heaven so high above our heads” (p. 160). However, and it is in this case where the presence of the nightingale is pivotal, the tone also carries an undercurrent of fleetingness and impending tragedy. As revealed as the scene progresses, it is not the nightingale that sang, but the lark, which means daylight is upon the lovers and calamity is lurking. Through this sort of negation of the nightingale, tragedy ensues and the tone finally takes its characteristic tragic feature that is not surprising to readers of this well-known play.

The tone in “Ode to a nightingale” has a rather subtle quality which opposes the abovementioned impulsive, tragic tone. In fact, it could be said that the predominant tone is one of melancholy and contemplation. Bloom (2009) writes:

The effect of the song on Keats is dual and strongly physical, indeed almost deathly. His heart aches, and his sense is pained with a drowsy numbness that suggests, first, having been poisoned; next, having taken a narcotic. Not the sound alone of the song, but Keats’s empathizing with the bird, has done this. He is not envious of the bird, but is too happy in its happiness. He cannot sustain his own negative capability in this case; he has yielded his being too readily to that of the bird. (p. 297)

Keats reflects on the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death, which lends a somber quality to the poem: “Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf” (p. 680). In similar fashion, the nightingale scene in *Romeo and Juliet* is not short of somber qualities, although much more directly stated to the point of tragedy. There is also a strong sense of longing in “Ode”, as the speaker yearns to escape the troubles and suffering of life and join the immortal song of the nightingale: “Away! away! for I will fly to thee” (p. 678). Finally, the poem carries a wistful tone as the speaker imagines the nightingale’s world as an idyllic, timeless realm and contrasts it with the harsh realities of human existence. In summary, while both the nightingale scene in *Romeo and Juliet* and “Ode to a Nightingale” feature this bird, the tones of the two works are distinct. *Romeo and Juliet* is characterized by youthful passion and optimism, whereas “Ode” is marked by a more contemplative and melancholic tone, delving into the complexities of life, death, and the fleeting nature of joy.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the nightingale’s symbolism in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” stresses the enduring power of symbols to evoke profound and universal human experiences. Despite their differences in genre, historical context, and thematic focus, both works utilize the nightingale as a richly layered symbol that resonates across time and cultures. In Shakespeare’s tragedy, the nightingale captures the fleeting nature of time and the inevitability of separation and mortality, encapsulating the urgency of forbidden love and the existential threats faced by the protagonists. Meanwhile, Keats’ Romantic meditation transforms the nightingale into a symbol of escapism, transcendent beauty, and the tension between human suffering and immortal longing. Together, these texts demonstrate the nightingale’s capacity to unify and amplify contrasting themes, proving its adaptability as a literary device across genres and eras.

The methodology chosen for this study, rooted in Jean Chevalier and Juan Eduardo Cirlot's theories of symbolism, complemented by interdisciplinary insights from Animal Studies and Comparative Literature, has proven particularly effective in elucidating the complexities of the nightingale's literary function. Chevalier's categorization of symbols into functions provided a robust framework for interpreting how the bird operates in each text. For example, the Exploratory function allowed an understanding of the nightingale as a bridge between abstract concepts such as time and mortality and their tangible emotional manifestations in the lives of the characters. The Substituting and Mediating functions further illuminated the bird's ability to articulate desires and fears that remain unspoken, particularly in *Romeo and Juliet's* nightingale scene.

The interdisciplinary incorporation of Animal Studies enriched the analysis by situating the nightingale within a broader cultural context. This approach recognized the bird not merely as a literary motif but as a reflection of human relationships with the natural world, highlighting the dynamic interplay between humans and non-human animals in shaping cultural narratives. By drawing on the works of Robles and Bach, the study highlighted how birds, particularly the nightingale, have historically been imbued with moral, spiritual, and symbolic significance, enhancing their literary role. Additionally, the comparative framework employed in this paper aligns with Armando Gnisci's call for Comparative Literature to serve as a pluralistic and integrative poetics. By juxtaposing an Elizabethan play with a Romantic ode, the analysis illustrated how shared symbols such as the nightingale traverse boundaries of time and genre, inviting readers to explore their convergences and divergences. This methodology justified the selection of these two texts as ideal counterparts, given their mutual focus on the nightingale as a nexus of thematic and symbolic resonance.

The chosen methodology for this paper combines rigorous literary analysis with a multidimensional perspective on symbols. Chevalier and Cirlot's frameworks offer a structured lens for interpreting symbolism, while Animal Studies and Comparative Literature broaden the scope to encompass historical and cultural dimensions. This integrative approach not only deepens the understanding of the nightingale's role in

Romeo and Juliet and “Ode to a Nightingale” but also affirms the value of interdisciplinary methodologies in literary studies. Future research could extend this analysis by exploring the nightingale’s representation in other literary traditions, particularly in non-Western cultures, where its symbolic associations might diverge or intersect in unexpected ways.

Furthermore, examining the nightingale’s presence in contemporary literature and media could shed light on how modern contexts reshape traditional symbols, reflecting evolving human concerns. A cross-cultural and diachronic study of avian symbolism in literature could also provide valuable insights into how birds, as intermediaries between the earthly and the transcendent, continue to inspire human creativity and meaning-making. Additionally, a study that explores in detail the symbolism of birds from the specific perspective of Animal Studies might also be relevant to craft new meanings into this symbol. In conclusion, this study celebrates the nightingale’s unparalleled literary versatility and enduring cultural significance. Through the chosen methodology, it has been possible to uncover the bird’s multifaceted role as both a mirror of human emotions and an emblem of universal themes. By integrating symbolic analysis with interdisciplinary and comparative approaches, this research affirms the nightingale’s place as a timeless symbol that bridges divides between nature, culture, and human experience.

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