

## A Psychoanalytic Reading of Ode to a Nightingale

John Keats<sup>1</sup>, Norah Hadi Alsaeed<sup>2</sup>,  
Assistant Professor, Jouf University  
Saudi Arabia .Sakaka Aljouf

### Corresponding Author\*

Norah Hadi Alsaeed

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**Abstract:** As a Romantic poet whose subjectivity is a central element in his odes, Keats' poetry has been accused of being self-obsessed and self-conscious. Such self-consciousness seems to be both a basic element in Sigmund Freud's psychological theory and a recurrent element in John Keats' poems. An understanding of Keats' poetic unconsciousness leads to an understanding of his poetry.

This paper sheds light on John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" from a psychological point of view. It discusses issues of the pains and sorrows of life in Keats' world of imagination, which differ from those in the real world. Mortality, immortality, reality, and dreams are the other images reflected in Keats' ode.

**Keywords:** Sigmund Freud, Romanticism, unconsciousness, immortality, dreams, psychoanalytical criticism, life, death, dreams, ego, superego, id.

## INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalytic critics are not agreed on the probable application of psychoanalytic concepts to literary works. Undoubtedly, not all psychological concepts can be applied to every literary work, however, some concepts in psychoanalytical criticism can be applied to literary works. The task of the critic is to see which concept operates in the literary text in a way which yields a meaningful, coherent, psychoanalytic interpretation. A psychological approach to the study of literature has been the most abused approach. Scholars and critics most commonly employed a psychological approach as an interpretative tool to enhance their understanding and appreciation of literature. Psychological interpretation offers various ways to understand and appreciate thematic and symbolic mysteries in a given text. There is a great deal of serious literature that can be interpreted using the psychological approach of Freud.

Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, P. B. Shelley, etc., can be analyzed by taking into account Freud's theory of psychology. Subjectivity is one of the dominant aspects of romantic poetry. The unconscious mind of romantic poets accounts for the subjectivity in their respective poetry. John Keats's odes are studied and interpreted from a psychological point of view. The conflicts John Keats' life give birth to many odes. Life and death are the major aspects of *Ode to a Nightingale* and

*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, whereas love is knotted with pain, and pleasure is entangled with death in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*. The conflict between life and death is a recurring theme in most of his poems. This conflict cum paradox is central in Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Sigmund Freud is considered to be the pioneer in the field of psychological criticism. His psychological principles and theories are useful tools for interpreting and evaluating literature. Literary critics apply the following psychological theories:

- The dominance of the unconscious over the conscious,
- The expression of the conscious through symbols and images,
- The primacy of sexuality as a motivating force in human behavior.

Literature was seen as a dream by early critics. The authors revealed themselves through the art, and the critics analyzed the art and the works of the authors, and pointed out the subjective nature of the concerned literature and author.

Sigmund Freud was considered the founder of modern psychology. He emphasizes on the unconscious aspects of the human psyche. According to Freud most of our actions and behaviors are motivated and shaped by psychological forces, which human beings cannot control. He distinguishes levels of conscious from unconscious mental activity. He writes, "We call unconscious any mental process the existence of which we are not directly aware." Freud proceeds further to bring out the significance of the unconscious. He writes "even the most conscious processes are conscious for only a short period...." (Freud 14)

Freud was concerned with activities taking place unconsciously in the mind of humans. His study of the human mind resulted in his proposition of "Id, Ego, Superego". Freud developed these concepts to understand the conscious and unconscious forces that guide a person's behavior. He classified the personality of the human being into the id, the ego, and the superego.

Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, P. B. Shelley, etc., can be analyzed by taking into account Freud's theory of psychology. Subjectivity is one of the dominant aspects of romantic poetry. The unconscious mind of romantic poets accounted for the subjectivity in their respective poetry. "Romanticism is related to the unconscious, as opposed to classicism, with its emphasis on restraining and order, is oriented toward the conscious, particularly the ego and the superego" (Guerin 1992: 141).

Joel Faflak argued in his book that Romanticism, and especially English Romantic poetry, invented psychoanalysis before Freud. The Romantic period has always been treated as a period of primary psychological exploration that anticipates more complex discoveries in the science of mind. Romantic psychoanalysis challenges this assumption by treating psychoanalysis in the Romantic period as a discovery in itself, and a way to return Freud to his future. When reading romantic literature, Faflak suggests that it "takes us back to psychoanalysis". (Faflak 2007)

John Keats' poems are studied and interpreted from a psychological point of view. Caldwell's book *John Keats' Fancy: The Impact of Psychology of his Time on Keats* is concerned with Keats's poetry, and sheds light on the philosophical and psychological elements in his poems (Caldwell 1945). Conflicts in John Keats' life give rise to many poems. Life, death, birth, and rebirth are the main aspects

of an ode to Nightingale and Odie on a Greek urn, while beauty, love, joy, and pains are all intertwined together, as in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*. and *Isabella. Or the Pot of Basil*. The struggle between life and death is a recurring theme in most of his poems. This conflict-based paradox is central to Keats's poem of Nightingale. The pain and sorrows of life in the realm of Keats' imagination are different from those in the real world. Mortality, eternity, reality, and dreams are the other images that were reflected in Keats's poetry.

Dreams play the most important role in Freud's theory of psychology. According to Freud, dreams are vital to understanding the unconscious. Fears, desires, and emotions are manifested in dreams with wishes and desires also often manifesting in dreams. All kinds of dreams, including negative dreams, are a form of wish-fulfillment; certain things which do not occur in one's life can occur in one's dream. Such dreams are often considered as a signal or a warning. According to Freud, the messages in dreams are encoded, and such encoded messages are stored in our unconscious mind which later communicate using various symbols and images. Some of these symbols and images are impersonal, and others very personal. In short, Freud distinguishes the 'manifest content' of dreams from the 'latent content' of dreams (Freud 13).

The mind rarely presents dream content in a simple and direct fashion. It presents a complex dream using basic elements. Freud writes about the dream: "We have introduced a new class of psychical material between the manifest content of dreams and the conclusions of our enquiry: namely their *latent* content, or (as we say) the 'dream-thoughts', arrived at by means of our procedure. It is from these dream-thoughts and not from a dream's manifest content that we disentangle its meaning. We are thus presented with a new task, that is, of investigating the relations which had no previous existence: the task, that is, of investigating the relations between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts, and of tracing out the processes by which the latter have been changed into the former" (Freud 2002: 131). Freud believed that the conscious mind represses the messages in dreams. Thus, dreams are considered as manifestations of repressed desires and emotions. The human mind is torn between the desires repressed by the conscious mind and those in the unconscious mind. It becomes imperative to find out the various shades of the complexity of dreams and symbols. Freud developed the technique of analyzing dreams. This technique is known as 'free association'. This technique enables the reader to study the type of thoughts and emotions generated by the dream. This kind of study leads to seek other thoughts and emotions hidden at a deeper level. The thoughts and emotions generated at the deeper level by the dream are known as the dream-thoughts or ideas, while the dream content is described as the dream content. Dream thoughts are immediately comprehensive, whereas dream contents are expressed as if they were in a pictographic script. Dream contents are also associated with whatever comes into the head. According to Freud, the critic must deal with an unconscious process of thoughts

For instance, birds seen in a dream represent the image of a child feeding birds, which might lead to a memory of one particular day in the park, which might remind one of one's mother, etc. The task of the critic is to record the chain of associations of images and symbols gathered in the mind in order to understand the reader or dreamer. Freud looks at each individual element of a dream and uses each one as a starting point for free association. He attempts to pull all the threads together into an overall analysis.

In this way, the dreamer can catch up on repressed emotions. Freud's theory of the dream allows the psychoanalytic critic to see various shades and meanings of the image of the bird.

To Freud, death is a biological drive, which he terms as the death drive. He emphasizes that there must be something in our biological make-up as a species to explain this death drive. The psychological experiences help the reader and the critic to understand humans' relationships with death. The present research article attempts to apply Freud's theory of death to John Keats' Odes.

## II METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the researcher adopts the interdisciplinary method combining psychology and literature. The researcher refers to different critical sources to analyze John Keats' Ode to a Nightingale.

## III RESULT

The psychoanalytic approach is greatly influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud. The approach focuses on the characters' motives, particularly the investigation of "hidden" desires, fears, etc., which may conflict with explicitly recognized feelings. For example, Keats has suffered a lot of personal losses in his life, especially the loss of his mother and brother Tom. His Ode to A Nightingale allows his thoughts to fly freely, and this is a result of the free inspiration of unconscious emotions. His experience with the Nightingale is reminiscent of Freud's theories of life, death, dreams, and immortality. The discussion below will explain this experience more importantly. This experience is not coherent because it occurs in his mind subconsciously. Psychologically, three main ideas emerge.

The limitation of these ideas is Keats's assessment of life. Life is frustrating and boring. The happiness of Nightingale causes his short-lived happiness, which is followed by the conviction that life is not only painful but also unbearable. The second main idea and the main theme of the poem is Keats' desire to die and completely rid himself of life, provided that he dies easily and painlessly as well as can sleep. The poet's preoccupation with death comes as a result of the destruction of his family. Thus the death wish in the poem may be a response to many troubles and frustrations, all of which are still with him. The third main idea in the poem is the power of imagination or fancy. In the poem, Keats rejects wine for the sake of poetry, and the product of imagination is a way of identifying his existence with the existence of the happy nightingale

These thoughts in the mind of John Keats are the same themes that dominate Sigmund Freud's psychological method, a method which is basically treating obscure self-illness, and also a method which explains human reactions towards life, death, and dreams. John Keats' subjective free self-expression typically matches Freud's way of letting his patients express their feelings freely. The research finds out that the psychological developments of Keats's poems fill the gap between psycho-criticism and romantic poems. Keats's odes partly prove, or even fully prove the psychological perspective.

#### IV DISCUSSION

John Keats's odes may be interpreted from a psychoanalytic point of view: "The odes speak of desires and yearnings, of possibilities and impossibilities, of the joys of the imagination and the frustrations of the human state". So the odes are explorations of these preoccupying conflicts and they are the mature expressions of a number of deep-seated anxieties" (Watson 1992: 260-262).

There are approximately 400 poems written about the nightingale in English literature. Among these poems, the Romantic period witnessed 52 poems. The first written English poetry about the nightingale dates back to an Anglo-Saxon puzzle of the Eighth Century. In the classical tradition, the nightingale is associated with pain, suffering, and injustice. Likewise, Keats wrote a verse about the Nightingale that is not completely romantic. His exposure to the Nightingale has a taste of pain, suffering, sadness, and death. Like the classical tradition, the nightingale is associated with pain in the Christian tradition. The Nightingale puts her chest on a thorn to prevent herself from falling asleep and stay awake to sing. But the Nightingale's Christian sense involve some positives: his song is supposed to express his longing for heaven, which is about Keats's longing for immortality.

Both classical and Christian traditions have their own associations with the nightingale. Both traditions saw the bird as a sign of sorrow and joy, and life is a mixture of sorrows and joys. In the same way, the nightingale is seen as a bird of sorrow and joy. This paradox of life is a recurring theme of John Keats' odes, such as *Ode to Melancholy*, and many others:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu (21-23)

John Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* is a poem full of emotions and sensations. The nightingale displays her abilities to sing as an unconscious behavior. Being a very self-conscious writer, Keats had a vision of looking beyond the nightingale's singing. He visualized something sad, unhappy, and painful in the song of the nightingale. The poet is not able to present the bird in its full and perfect form. His art fails to capture both beauty and ugliness in Nightingale's song. The Nightingale is an ecstatic and inattentive singer. The bird does not sing at the present time, not even this world. The song of the bird is not hindered by the "full-throat ease" of singing it with the reality of a world where (as the third stanza states) "but to think is to be full of sorrow".

The poem vividly portrays Keats's attempt to free himself from the self, which thinks of the present world. He wants to join his true poetic self and recoiling to his 'sole self' as the song fades. Freud's terms ego, super-ego, and id are useful to study Keats' attempt to free himself from his unconscious self. The super-ego of the author impels the poet to be free from worldly attachment –id, represented by the nightingale. When the poet attempts to give up his id, he is reduced to a 'sole' self, without any imagined mate.

It seems that John Keats combines both the conscious and unconscious worlds, reconciling their opposites, and reaps the best of both states. The poem *Ode to a Nightingale* is a fine example of Keats's reconciliation of opposite worlds. The poem attempts to find out a point where these two states of mind meet through means of drugging, death, or creativity. In his article, "The Sub-Text of Keats's 'Ode to a

Nightingale’,” Karl Wentersdorf explains the importance of this ode: “In a sense, the excursion in *Ode to a Nightingale* record in brief the aesthetic and psychological journey that had led Keats to a more mature judgment regarding poetry and its relation to life,” (Wentersdorf 1984: 82). Keats is interested to see how life and the world of poetry mingle together and can possibly merge. In another of his poems, *To Autumn*, John Keats accomplishes what is hinted at by *Ode to a Nightingale*. Keats is happy to accept the passage of time and found a point merging mortality and immortality, life and death, permanence and impermanence, ripeness and decay, dark and light, and so on. *Ode to a Nightingale* proves to be an important step in Keats' attempt of a merging of opposites and extracting the best of both worlds.

Mortality and immortality are the two major opposites that John Keats attempts to balance in *Ode to a Nightingale*. The conscious mind of the speaker (poet) accepts death as inevitable in life, whereas the unconscious mind of the nightingale accepts immortality. The speaker of the poem believes in death as an inevitable in life. However, there the song of the bird remains forever. It does not perish with the passing of time. In his article, “The Immortality of the Natural: Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale’”, Kappel focuses on why the nightingale is seen as immortal, and man is not: "This ontological difference gives rise to the essential experiential distinction between the two beings, around which the poem is built: the bird is oblivious to death, man painfully aware of it," (Kappel 1978: 272). The nightingale does not know of death, and therefore lives every day without fear of death. On the other hand, the speaker is mortal in that he knows of and expects death. It should be noted that the world of the nightingale is natural and hence eternal and never knows death (Kappel 1978: 272). Keats points to this idea:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan; (21-24)

Keats is interested in the nightingale’s natural and primitive world where there are no earthly fears. The bird lives in the company of nature, among the leaves. The Romantic poet’s aspiration for nature is also seen in the nightingale, who aspires to dwell in leaves. The poet uses the capital letter of “Bird” that symbolizes nature:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down;  
The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown (61-64)

According to John Keats, the bird and nature are free from an earthly burden; they are immortal. The poet has reconciled the two worlds in order to escape the pain and mortality of the conscious world.

In order to join the mockingbird in its dark world empty of pain and full of permanence, the speaker first explores drunkenness. The speaker calls for a quantity of wine:

O for a beaker full of the warm South  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth;  
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

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(15-20)

Here, the poet-speaker expects the intoxication of alcohol to bring him into the world of the nightingale by numbing his consciousness and the pains of mortal life. Due to the workings of wine, humans become unconscious for the time being and forget all of their worldly fears about life and death. In this way, it is a symbol of both mortality and immortality. The speaker drinks wine and enters into the unconscious world. Thus wine is a medium to enter the unconscious world from the conscious world. However, the intoxication of wine provides a temporary experience of two states of mind that is conscious before the drinking and unconscious after the drinking. It cannot provide a lasting combination of these two states, as the effects of wine are only temporary.

Like the bird, the poet wants to enjoy immortality. He wants to avoid the temporary state of living human beings. He thinks that death would offer him an escape from the difficulties and sorrows of the earthly world. He likes to transcend the unpleasant states of the conscious world. Jeffery Baker brings out Keats's faults to escape from the pains and sorrows of the conscious world represented by the earthly world and embrace the unconscious world by means of death:

Keats' position at this moment in the poem is that consciousness is extinguished by death, but the contrary case is offered by the conflicting implications of the diction. If Keats dies, he will cease, but the bird will continue to pour its soul abroad (Baker 1986: 148).

Keats' attempt to embrace death to enjoy immortality and the unconscious world is a kind of solution. To him, death is a kind of drive. In contrast to the Freudian concept, Keats's death is an escape from, or defense against, surrounding sufferings. Therefore, while death may seem like the perfect solution, it lacks the immortality that unconsciousness offers when posed against consciousness. Death oversteps the reconciliation of opposites that Keats attempts to achieve, as death is final. Janet Spens supports this idea in her article, "A Study of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'":

Death would make him deaf and blind to the beauty of the world concentrated in the bird's song, and he cries out that it is of immortal life, not death that the nightingale sings: its song 'beck's him to the 'fellowship divine': he has stepped into the oneness of the world of pure emotion. (Spens 1952: 242)

Death ignores the desired aspects of the conscious and unconscious worlds. The beauty and activity of the physical world and the immortality of nature's world are lost with death. To reap the benefits of both worlds, the speaker should think beyond the simple, mediocre, and temporary method of drunkenness and stop short of the final, extreme, and blinding method of death. The speaker must join the nightingale's immortal song with a song of his own. The speaker's joining of the nightingale's song is one way to achieve immortality.

There are other ways to achieve immortality for the speaker. These ways are possible through action. When the conscious and unconscious worlds are reconciled, the immortality of the unconscious world and the action of the conscious will become one. Sloth, laziness, and indolence are pushed aside and physical death is accepted. As a result, the speaker may reach the point where the two worlds combine. The nightingale and its song can be likened to the poet and his poem: "If the nightingale's song

is a symbol of lyric poetry, the words 'immortal Bird' must refer to the Poet" (Kappel1978: 270). In this way, like the nightingale, the poet can enjoy immortality through his poem. The bird's song is immortal as it lives in all ages for all people. John Keats writes:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
 No hungry generations tread thee down;  
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
 (61-64)

The nightingale's song is eternal and permanent. Both the bird and song are immortal. There is no death for the song and its creator. The speaker of the poem sees immortality in the world of the nightingale and its song and is moved to join the bird through the act of his own creation of art.

The speaker thinks that he cannot live forever, but his song, like the nightingales, will be immortal and permanent, and through his verse, he can enjoy immortality. In order to enjoy eternity, the speaker must cast away his indolence and start to create. Alcohol is not the way to achieve immortality:

Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,  
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy (31-33)

Here, the speaker denies the intoxication of alcohol as a legitimate solution for his desire for reconciling the conscious and unconscious worlds. Death is also not the proper way to enjoy the world of the conscious and the unconscious. He would join the nightingale's immortality through the art. Keats speaks of death as a possible solution to Death in Life:

I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
 Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
 To take into the air my quiet breath;  
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring fourth thy soul abroad  
 In such an ecstasy!  
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain---  
 To thy high requiem become a sod.  
 (51-60)

The above lines bring out Keats' temptation of death because the poet thinks that death would surely end all pains. However, he realizes that all of his mortal pains would come to an end; the bird would live and sing forever. On the other hand, the consciousness of the speaker would be dead, and therefore unable to experience this beauty and immortality. The bird would live and create still, while the speaker would have left the life and beauty of the conscious world and consequently sink below this world to a final unconsciousness. He is buried beneath the earth, unable to enjoy both conscious and unconsciousness. Therefore, he sees that the key to reaping the pleasure of both states and living eternity



is to follow the nightingale and its song. Further, Keats sees his solution as inadequate and is refused unconsciously because of the domination of the id which insists that he satisfy his needs.

In his Ode to Nightingale, John Keats describes a short personal escape from the presence of his sufferings that he can no longer tolerate. Keats writes in his letters that the poet possesses a "negative capacity," and the power of self-esteem to present and speak about other things, and to them, Keats depicts in the Nightingale as one of these experiences. Keats leaves "himself alone" (72) to join the Nightingale in poetry, who understands succinctly, in human language, the enduring beauty of his song.

John Keats recalls the drug-related vision of the bird because the body's experience feels that it is moving through a light channel. When the reason is repeated, the person remembers the event as a beautiful daydream. This experiment is known by parapsychologists as OBD. Keat's acknowledgment of this is "fade away" (20-21) to leave the world. At that moment of drug abuse his mind "perplexes and retards" (34) and flies. When his senses return to the body, he becomes aware of what he may have experienced, "a waking dream" (79) (Wrenn 2004: 14).

John Keats employs images to represent central themes in his work: death and sleep, with death especially in question. The nightingale is the central object in this poem. The poet wishes to escape the inevitability of death with the help of the nightingale, "Thou wasn't born for death immortal Bird" (64). It is interesting that the nightingale's song gives immortality to the poet through his song. This song will save the poet from the sorrow and misery of death: 'fade away into the forest dim' (20).

## V. CONCLUSION

The image of the nightingale expands the idea of the bird as a symbol of nature. As discussed above, it is a means of escape when Keats pledges to follow the nightingale "on the viewless of poesy" (34). It seems that Keats is troubled with issues of life and the pains associated with it. He wishes to escape these issues by following the simplicity of Nightingale's song. The nightingale is a symbol of the endless world of immortality and eternity, and it reflects the unconscious world. of the poet, The nightingale's song is the bridge between immortality and mortality (human existence). It emphasizes the struggle between the actual and the ideal worlds.

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