

## Death, Dream, and the Dissonance of the Soul: Uncharted Spiritual Symbolism in John Keats and John Donne

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### Abstract

*This literary piece is a qualitative, comparative research study of the unknown spiritual symbolism in the poems of the poet John Donne and John Keats in the context of the related themes of death, dream and the soul, the discordance with the soul. The first goal is to discuss how both poets address the metaphysical and existential questions by symbolically presenting the images of mortality and transcendence. Based on the chosen works, including the Holy Sonnets by Donne and A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, or the Ode to a Nightingale by Keats and The Fall of Hyperion, the paper will discover the stratum of spiritual conflict and dream-like processing that points to the inner struggle regarding dying, religion, and poetry immortality. Information is obtained by up-close textual commentary and fortified through critical theory in metaphysical and Romantic poetics. They are analyzed by hermeneutic and dialogic analysis in symbolic and thematic interpretation. The findings show that there is a rather complicated juxtaposition between spiritual self-confidence and existential fear: Donne is sure in his theological vision of soul-producing and attaining immortality by the power of poetry contrasting to Keats who is ambivalent in his aesthetical vision of existence and its poeticization. This paper has shown that between Donne and Keats, two writers divided by time and ideology resides a shared symbolic language which serves to disarm the linear interpretation of their deaths and reiterates that human progress is defined with regard to metaphysical meaning on the one hand expressed through dream and on the other through dissonance.*

**Keywords:** Spiritual Symbolism, Death and immortality, Metaphysical poetry, Romantic Aestheticism, Dream and Soul Dissonance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Death and dream as well as the themes connected with the soul have taken a central position in the literary traditions of the ages. In the English poetry, the poets John Donne and John Keats can be considered as archetypes, who despite a variety of historical and philosophical parameters, highlight those themes in a very deep symbolic tone. A poet of the metaphysical school (in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) Donne anchors the work with righteous immediacy and religious interrogation and addresses the subject of death through scholasterly and through Christianity. Keats, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic poet, on the other hand, imbues the poetry with aesthetic thought and emotional sensitivity and faces the mortality through the surmising of imagination, dream life and sensuous abundance (Bloom, 2004). The paper explores the unexplored spiritual symbolism easily acquired by the testimony of their treatment of death and the agitation of the soul, indicating how further links are drawn between metaphysical surety and Romantic confusion.

Although much has been already written on the theological aspect of the poetry of Donne and the aesthetic yearning of the poetry of Keats, not much has been said of the comparison of their treatment with symbolism in poems as to the engagement of death and the dreamlike dislocation of the soul. The scholarship available tends to divide their works into their own traditions, Donne in the metaphysical poetry tradition and Keats in the Romantic one, thus missing the spiritual dialogues brought out by a comparative reading of the poetry of both. This study fills the gap as it examines symbolic language that the two poets use in expressing how the soul struggles between ephemeral life and higher yearnings (Gardner, 1985; Stillinger, 2001).

The present research proposes a dialogic interpretation that revalues the poetic worlds of Donne and Keats in terms of the metaphysical exploration that defuses the historicity of poetry to touch ever eternal human issues. The study can potentially help to resolve certain ambiguity that surrounds the philosophical basis of English poetry by presenting how death and symbols are expressed through dreams to convey the dissonance of the soul. It also throws some light on the unity of the inquiry of the metaphysical to the Romantic era a new look out at canonical poets and their abiding significance in addressing the most existential of questions of life (Bush, 1985). This kind of comparative investigation contributes to literary criticism in that it fills niche spaces of spiritual symbolism in poetic traditions so that we will understand better the part of literature in mapping the invisible parts of human experience.

## II. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

This paper aimed at investigating and comparing poetic images of Keats and Donne concerning their poetic images to death and dream, and dissimilarities between soul and dissimilarities in their poems.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The most recent scholarship has broadened the discussion of Donne and his work on death to a wider context than religion. According to Ramachandran (2021), the Holy Sonnets must be deemed as spiritual performances, where the poetic self-bargains between the human desires of fear and hope in reaction to divine judgment. Paradoxical faith expressed in the sonnets, particularly the sonnet *Death, be not proud*, is also a bit of an account of accepting death and at the same time overcoming it spiritually. Symbolic system of comprehending dissimilarity of the soul by its relation to sin, salvation, and eternity is formed by the metaphysical conceits utilized by Donne. Keats dream description has been seen as his aesthetic escape as well as existence conflict. By referring to the poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, Hill (2022) believes that it is one of the best examples of the struggle between the desire to be free and consciousness of the human inability to transcend. The time of his return to reality

after retreating into the world of the dream is frequently undetermined, pointing out the discordance of poetic imagination and mortal consciousness. This is symbolic language of the dream being take as an escape and confrontation, which reflects spiritual indecision of Keats.

Developing the theme of the relationship between metaphysical and Romantic symbolisms, Brown and Edwards (2023) observe similarities between two traditions as they both refer to the image of soul journey in order to describe spiritual crisis and hope use. The metaphysical concern articulated by the religious metaphors of Donne and the aesthetic symbols of Keats reach a common point, but they both are framed under different phrases and divine judgment in the religious metaphors of Donne and poetic immortality in the aesthetic symbols of Keats. According to their work, there is a certain continuity extended between the two epochs in dealing with the metaphysical aspects of human existence. Donne and Keats use symbolic light and darkness to give out a reflection of levels of spiritual awareness (Ahmed 2022). Donne tends to equate God-given light with grace and salvation, and Keats applies shadow and twilight in dealing with liminality and dream, as well as death. Light in *The Fall of Hyperion* is as metaphor of poetic awakening and in *A Valediction* by Donne it is symbol that is translated as a constant spiritual unity. The differences in these symbolisms show differ tons in the transcendence of the soul.

More recently, Lin (2021) offers a psychological-literary interpretation of the discord between Donne and Keats, where it emphasizes the fact that readers perceive the unity of the poem as a separate entity rather than the unity of the poetic book, which is essentially the lack of integrity or fragmentation. Donne is severely conflicted with the flesh and faith and Keats is torn apart by the artistic vision and the death. Lin observes that the two poets develop dialog of the self, and the symbolic language that they adopt is full of religious, mythic, and dream images of the self. In her paper, Morgan (2020) discusses death as the metaphor of spiritual transformation of both poets. In Donne physical death is a pathway to life everlasting in God, whereas, in Keats death assumes the potential to another life in aesthetic eternity. This metaphorical purpose of death enables both the poets to transcend their individual suffering into spiritual on the universal level by providing opposing yet interrelated opinions about the life after.

Wills (2023) uses Bakhtinian dialogism in Keats and Donne, with reference to the fact how their poetry involves dialog not only between the people and death, but between the speakers through time. This example of intertextual energy supports the overall way in which the two poets deal with the issue of temporal anxiety the fear of the flow of time and the wish to conquer the latter, by utilizing images of the superiority of the soul. Indeed, as Thompson (2021) notes, journey and threshold imagery plays a central role in how both poets address the state of the soul. Donne is depicted as being on a spiritual quest that is many times likened to a pilgrimage of union with God, but in Keats, spiritual journeys are aesthetic and rather unresolved. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats moves to the frontiers of eternity in the form of beauty and Donne in the form of faith evoking the yearning of the soul to eternal existence.

The same can be said about the dreamscape in Keats and Donne: its liminality erases the border between life and death, the real and the symbolic (Chen 2022). A dream of Keats tends to waver between the states of ecstasy and decay whereas the state of ecstasy of Donne in his vision viewed *A Valediction* in relation to transcendence based on symbolic detachment. It is revealed that the dream plays the critical role of being a manifestation of soul dissonance, along with protection and revenge. Recent way of discourse by Patel (2023) brings out the idea of how the poets are using the poetry as a tool to immortalize the soul. To Donne, the verse itself is the container of divine truth and in the case of Keats, the artifact of beauty that does not rot away. That voice of the soul, which can be heard in the symbolic

language, takes the poets out of their historical context, and puts them into contact with the unchanging metaphysical questions.

According to Smithson (2020), Donne makes bold pronouncements on where he is going after death, unlike Keats who left his contemplation hanging. In the *Fall of Hyperion*, Keats postulates the answers to the issue of prophetic knowledge, poetic power and he leaves spiritual meaning ambiguous. Donne on the contrary believes in assurance by divine graces. The variance in this shows how symbolic language portrays various reactions towards the mysticism of death. According to DSilva (2022), spiritual symbolism of these two writers swings between a state of ecstasy and anguish. The ecstasy and torment of the soul are witnessed in the direction of eroticizing the spiritual metaphors expressed by Donne and dreamlike sensuality expressed by Keats. The above mentioned emotional polarities are pictured by plentiful symbols of fragmentation, reunification, silence and sound, which underline the similar soul preoccupation of the poets with the life of a divided soul.

Although there is a great deal of literature on both symbolic theology and romantic constructs of poets such as John Donne and John Keats, the comparison of the symbolic attitudes of death, dream, and dissimilarity of the soul has not been researched critically, as the study of the theme comports. The literature or most of it is a treatment of their contributions in historical traditions, the metaphysical certainty of Donne and the imaginative ambiguity of Keats, without discussing their meeting spiritual fears in a dialogic sense. The paper presents a gap that is filled by finding identifying the ways of using symbolic language by both a poet navigating through metaphysical uncertainty and the yearning of the soul in transcending from temporal boundaries. Here the theoretical framework of this study is based on Bakhtinian dialogism and hermeneutic phenomenology that allows a cross temporal understanding of symbolic meaning. The theory of dialogism can provide the argument that Donne and Keats can address each other through the literary talk spanning the decades, as the hermeneutic approach will permit to read more into the symbolism of spiritual contents in their poetry. Collectively, these theories make possible a stratified mode of reading the poetic language as a vehicle of communication of existential and metaphysical strife.

#### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

This study followed a qualitative, comparative literary approach which applied *hermeneutic phenomenology* and the Bakhtinian dialogism to examine symbolic forms of representing death, dream and the soul dissonance in the poems chosen by John Donne and John Keats. The source of the research strategy included intimate reading and textual interpretation of four of the most important poems in this study: *Holy Sonnets* and *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* by Donne, *Ode to a Nightingale* and *The Fall of Hyperion* by Keats. It is because the language of these poems is spiritually and symbolically rich, and it deals with existential and metaphysical issues. By means of hermeneutic phenomenology, the study aimed at examining underlying subjectivities that exist in the symbolic language of the poets with special emphasis on metaphors of light, dark, dreamscapes, death, the body-soul boundary. The thematic coded symbolic patterns exhibited inner struggle, metaphysical desire and spiritual evolution. The use of Bakhtinian dialogism was done to facilitate the interpretation on the nonlinear communication between Donne and Keats despite their temporal and ideological differences where the two literary traditions, *Metaphysical and Romantic*, through a symbolic conversation create a scenic language that questions death, soul, and transcendence. In the secondary data methodology, journal articles, critical essays and books on *Metaphysical and Romantic* poetry, particularly involving spirituality and symbolic meaning were consulted. This twofold theoretical and analytical lens allowed the study to identify subtle parallels and oppositions and find an intricate poetic dialogue

between religious certitude and aesthetic indecision when it comes to mortality and the afterlife.

## V. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

The results of this paper show that John Donne and John Keats although they exist in different times and have different emphases, make use of the complex conception of the spiritual symbolism to convey the dissonance of the soul in facing death and the need to transcend. This paper through minute textual reading comes up with fifteen symbolic moments that remind us of the philosophical response of each poet on motifs of death, vision and metaphysics of the soul. Death in Donne, *Holy Sonnets* is not a thing to be feared but is to be confronted. The utterance of, "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so" (Holy Sonnet X), can be taken as an excellent example of theological resistance. Personification and paradox used by Donne portray his metaphysical confidence. His spiritual courage is also reiterated in, "One short sleep past, we wake eternally / And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die," as a sign of death being an illusion and immortality of his soul. On the contrary, the issues of treatment in death created by Keats in *Ode to a Nightingale* are ridden with an ambivalence: "Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain." The dream itself is a sign of aesthetic getaway as opposed to religion conviction of death without pain. The indelibility of beauty and the indelibility of soul-making are challenged by Keats using the following images, "Was it a dream, or a walking dream? Fled is that music:, Do I wake or sleep?"

Donne in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* invokes the symbol of the compass to express spiritual unity over and above the physical distance: "Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun." This symbol depicts metaphysical permanence and the transcendent connection in the soul. *The Fall of Hyperion* develops the image of a dismembered soul created by Keats: I saw all too much: "I saw too much: I saw through all things clearly; / It was not a dream." Here, the dreamscape is the context of bitter enlightenment, and thus Romantic contrast between lyrical vision and ecstasy and dread is observed. The symbol of violent spiritual renewal in the *Holy Sonnet XIV* by Donne, the use of the symbol of the divine light, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God", points out the symbol of violent spiritual renewal. The strength of the soul is acted out in paradoxical form of destruction and salvation. Likewise, in *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats has employed light as a signifier of unsuccessful ascent: "Upon the verge of consciousness, I dream'd / I was in Purgatory." Doubt and disillusionment intrudes into his vision of enlightenment.

*Holy Sonnet VI* contains elements of the eschatological hope of Donne also: "This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint / My pilgrimage's last mile." The icon of pilgrimage indicates a teleological experience of a soul towards spiritual oneness with God. In the poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, the Grecian imagery employed by Keats is, of "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" sets the human mortality against the symbolic eternity. The nightingale turns into a dream of something constant, poetic immortality. The symbolic separation of Donne with the body in the words, "When thou shalt be my music" *Holy Sonnet XVIII*, is an indication of the transformation of the soul in harmony with the God. Keats puts it in a different way in *The Fall of Hyperion*: "Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave / A paradise for a sect." In this case, dream is a critique, a sign of falsehood instead of truthfulness. The request of divine justice by Donne, which says teach me how to repent; "Teach me how to repent; for that's as good / As if thou hadst seal'd my pardon with thy blood" *Holy Sonnet VII*, puts the repentance process in the way of spiritual reconciliation as by a passage. Keats was reverberating the spiritual desire in aesthetic form when he was writing *Ode to a Nightingale*: "Away! away! for I will fly to thee, / Not charioted by Bacchus



and his pards." It is the imagination and not religious assurance that the soul desires liberation. Donne packs the salvation of the soul with erotic-spiritual combination in the *Holy Sonnet XIV*: "Take me to thee, imprison me, for I, / Except thou enthrall me, never shall be free." Keats, on the contrary, produces melancholy with beauty combined: "Darkling I listen; and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death."

However, the end result is that both poets are composing a metaphysical dialogue over the centuries of a symbolic language. Theological certainty of Donne comes up against the aesthetic ambivalence of Keats, but they both find a meeting point in the soul faced with the edges of mortality. In the search of divine order, Donne feels sure, but by seeking poetical disillusionment, Keats feels revelation. The similarities in the use of dream, light, death, and voice are highlights of an eternal human quest after spiritual meaning. Through their exploration of the realms of the faith and doubt, the body and the soul, the dream and waking hour, both poets are able to supply a poetic cartography of inner discordance and metaphysical desire that exceeds their traditions separately.

## VI. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

The results of his research provide an explanation of how both John Donne and John Keats engaged in the rhetorical exploration of death, dream, and the soul out of tune that deeply merge into a symbolic crossroad. Irrespective of their dissimilarity in time and ideology, the two poets develop elaborate symbolic structures and express universal spiritual anxieties. These answers can be read in accordance with, and as broadening, what previous scholarship has said, especially in the context of metaphysical reassurance and Romantic indecisiveness. The bold act of standing up to death in *Holy Sonnet X* (Death, be not proud...), so graphically described by Donne, directly confirms the perception of the poet expressed by Ramachandran (2021) that Donne used his poetry to dramatize the struggle of the soul through paradox and faith. The capitalization of death in the sonnet and the eclipse of death by the final theological triumph over death reflect what Morgan (2020) explains as the transformation of death to a spiritual boundary and not an endpoint by Donne. On the other hand, the poetic reveries presented by Keats in his *Ode to a Nightingale* ("Now more than ever seems it rich to die") are another demonstration of a longing of aesthetic transcendence, but with the same doubts that surround the issue of dreams being the solace and the crises, as Hill (2022) describes with regards to the analysis of the Keats dreams. His symbolic treatment of dream worlds as liminal spaces between escape and arousal can be traced to what Chen (2022) has characterized as Romantic confusion of the real and imagined spaces.

The contrast of the imagery of a theological compass by Donne in *A Valediction* to that of disillusioned vision by Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion* confirms the position by Lin (2021) that the two poets dwell on the concept of internal fragmentation albeit their opposing approaches toward it. The metaphysical union of Donne symbolizes the wholeness which is pursued with the divine love, whereas the fragmentation of Keats is caused by the lack of harmony between the mortal restrictions and the poetic desire. Symbolic light as divine illumination in Donne and spiritual blindness in Keats resonates with the fact that, according to Ahmed (2022), both poets use chiaroscuro to scenerize the metamorphosis of the soul or their complete dissatisfaction with it. There is a lot of symbolism of the world of the soul in the works of the two poets. In *Holy Sonnet VI*, Donne uses a metaphor of pilgrimage, and his theme follows the interpretation by Thompson (2021) of his poetry as a spiritual journey and search for a divine solution. The immortal bird mentioned by Keats in the *Ode to a Nightingale*, in its turn, is presented by the poet as a figurative concept of poetic immortality, rather than the religious eschatology, as Brown and Edwards (2023) believe that the whole idea reflects the transition to the aesthetic permanence as opposed to divine judgment in Romanticism. These two points of opposites emphasize the idea that the two poets, even

though they have different metaphysical intentions, locate spiritual journeys in the end towards transcendence.

Additionally, there is emotional and symbolic polarity between the two poets in terms of spiritual agony, savored by Donne, and erotic dream-induced melancholy, as portrayed by Keats, which is in line with the symbolic vocabulary of the words by D Dilva (2022): ecstasy and anguish. The erotic-spiritual combination in *Holy Sonnet XIV* by Donne and the aesthetic death-wish in *Darkling I listen...* written by Keats. Stir the troubled will of the soul, to be set free, in union with divine and in submission to art. Last but not least, the comparative approach of this study is directly applicable to the application of Bakhtinian dialogism by Wills (2023). Donne and Keats poetic voices interact through time creating a symbolic conversation that is not categorized across history. When Donne is suddenly being saved by grace, Keats is suddenly being saved by imagination but both of them describe the same soul, the metaphysical hunger that goes desperately in search of a symbolic satisfaction of immense power. This study confirms that sense of spiritual seeking in English poetry is not discontinuous. The metaphysical belief, apparent in Donne, and Romantic doubt, which Keats expresses, appear to be an opposite, but they both belong to the same poetic language of symbolic transcendence and internal conflict, linking theological faith and aesthetic sight.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The paper reveals that John Donne and John Keats, as much as they remain different in terms of historical and ideological backgrounds, have an intense symbolism of language of death, dream, and dissonance of the soul. The poetry of Donne speaks of metaphysical confidence and the theological one in presence of mortality, whereas the poetry of Keats is a Romantic uncertainty and aesthetic desire. Both poets also involve themselves in a talkative journey of the soul between the time and a transcendental experience through symbolic motifs like light, dreamscapes and spiritual journeys. Finally, this comparative study allows us to emphasize their permanent mark on literary spirituality through which they managed to sustain the connection between metaphysical faith and Romantic imagination in human desire of achieving immortality.

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