
**A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON DESIRE'S BITTERSWEET CADENCE:
A PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLORATION OF MORTALITY AND EXISTENTIAL
ANXIETY IN THE POETRY OF JOHN KEATS**

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Abstract:

This research article undertakes a psychoanalytic inquiry into the interwoven themes of desire, mortality, and existential anxiety in the poetry of John Keats. His poetic oeuvre—intensely lyrical, sensuous, and philosophically reflective—demonstrates a persistent engagement with the paradox of beauty and transience. Through theoretical frameworks derived from Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, this study examines poems such as *Ode to a Nightingale*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *When I Have Fears*, and *To Autumn*, arguing that Keats' poetry is a psychological landscape where longing is simultaneously pleasurable and painful, where beauty awakens intense yearning yet reminds the subject of life's impermanence.

This paper demonstrates how Keats' writings articulate unconscious conflicts, including the tension between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, the desire for transcendence, and the fear of annihilation. The study reveals that Keats' poetic imagination constructs meticulous emotional spaces that mirror universal human anxieties regarding death, desire, and the search for meaning. Hence, Keats' poetry is read here not merely as autobiographical testimony but as a profound commentary on the psychological and existential condition of humankind.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In Keats' poetic universe, moments of beauty shimmer only to reveal the shadow of mortality lurking behind them. The imminence of death becomes not merely a biographical truth—given Keats' lifelong struggle with tuberculosis and the premature deaths of his family—but a philosophical condition shaping his aesthetics. His poetry vibrates with intense desire for permanence in a world dictated by transience. This existential tension appears poignantly in *When I Have Fears*, where he laments:

“When I have fears that I may cease to be Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain” (Keats 1–2).

The fear of dying before fulfilling creative and emotional desires haunts much of Keats' oeuvre. Similarly, in *Ode to a Nightingale*, the poet's craving for escape into the bird's seemingly immortal song masks deep yearning for release from worldly suffering. His line—"Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known"—reveals both longing for oblivion and recognition of its impossibility.

This paper argues that Keats' poetry dramatizes a sophisticated interplay between **desire**, **mortality**, and **existential anxiety**, reflecting the complex psychological mechanisms that shape human emotional life. Through psychoanalytic frameworks—particularly Freudian notions of the pleasure principle and the death drive, and Lacanian concepts of desire, the Real, and lack—this study interprets Keats' imaginative worlds as spaces where beauty becomes a site of psychological conflict.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalytic Thought and Literary Imagination:

Freudian Foundations:

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis provides a foundational structure for interpreting unconscious desires in literature. His model of the psyche—the id (instinctual drives), ego (rational mediator), and superego (moral order)—shows how internal conflicts manifest through creative expression. Two Freudian concepts are especially pertinent:

1. **The Pleasure Principle** — humanity's innate drive toward pleasure, beauty, and gratification.
2. **The Death Drive (Todestrieb)** — a counterforce that seeks equilibrium through inertia, dissolution, or symbolic return to an inorganic state.

Keats' oscillation between longing for beauty and awareness of mortality exemplifies this Freudian struggle.

1.2. Lacanian Extensions:

Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud enriches the analysis. Key Lacanian ideas used in this study include:

- **Desire arises from lack**, an absence at the core of subjectivity.
- **The Symbolic Order** governs language, culture, and meaning.
- **The Real** represents the traumatic, unrepresentable truth—often related to death.
- **Objet petit a**, the unattainable object of desire.

Keats' idealized beauty, unattainable women, and eternal artistic forms can all be read as symbolic substitutions for the elusive object of desire.

1.3. Psychoanalytic Criticism in Literature:

In literary analysis, psychoanalytic theory reveals emotional undercurrents, unconscious symbolism, and psychological tensions embedded within texts. When applied to Keats, it allows us to uncover how mortality and desire shape his poetic imagination.

2. Need of the Study:

John Keats' poetry occupies a central position in English Romantic literature, yet his writings continue to invite new interpretive possibilities, especially through modern psychological and psychoanalytic lenses. While scholars have extensively discussed Keats' aesthetics, sensuous imagery, and philosophy of beauty, there exists a significant gap in examining how his poetic expressions reflect deeper psychological conflicts related to desire, mortality, and existential anxiety. The human unconscious, as theorized by Freud and Lacan, provides a profound framework to decode Keats' preoccupation with transience, longing, and the inevitability of death—elements that shaped both his artistic imagination and personal life.

A psychoanalytic exploration is therefore essential to understand how Keats' recurring themes of longing, fear, and emotional oscillation mirror universal human psychological processes. Such an inquiry not only enriches Keatsian scholarship but also demonstrates how Romantic poetry can illuminate timeless concerns about identity, fulfillment, loss, and the search for meaning. The need for this study further arises from the present academic interest in interdisciplinary approaches that blend literature with psychology, making this research relevant to contemporary literary criticism, modern humanities, and psychological studies of creativity.

3. Objectives of the Study:

- 1. To analyze how themes of desire, longing, and emotional intensity are expressed in John Keats' poetry through a psychoanalytic perspective.**
- 2. To examine the representation of mortality, transience, and existential anxiety in Keats' selected poems, particularly in relation to Freudian and Lacanian theoretical concepts.**
- 3. To explore how Keats' personal experiences of suffering, illness, and emotional vulnerability shape the psychological depth of his poetry.**

4. To identify the interplay between beauty, decay, fulfillment, and loss in poems such as *Ode to a Nightingale*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *When I Have Fears*, and *To Autumn*.
5. To apply key psychoanalytic concepts—such as the pleasure principle, death drive, desire-as-lack, and the Real—to interpret Keats’ poetic language, imagery, and emotional tensions.
6. To demonstrate how Keats’ poetry offers universal psychological insights into human desires, fears, and the ongoing confrontation with mortality.
7. To contribute an interdisciplinary understanding that bridges literature, psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy, enhancing the scholarly value of Keats’ work in contemporary research.

4.0 Literature Review:

Critics have long explored the psychological richness of Keats’ poetry. Harold Bloom identifies Keats’ “agon between creativity and mortality,” arguing that the poet’s awareness of his limited lifespan intensified his pursuit of imaginative transcendence (Bloom 127). Susan Wolfson highlights how Keats’ letters reveal deep anxiety over illness and artistic inadequacy, both of which surface in his poems as themes of longing and loss (Wolfson 56).

Recent psychoanalytic readings emphasize:

- the death drive in Keats’ fascination with decay,
- Lacanian desire in *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Grecian Urn*,
- sublimation in *To Autumn*.

This study builds on these approaches while offering a cohesive thematic analysis that combines desire, anxiety, and mortality across multiple poems.

Desire as a Double-Edged Sword: Longing and Unease in Keats’ Poetry:

Keats presents desire as both intoxicating and destructive. Three poems illuminate this tension:

1. *Ode to a Nightingale*: The Desire for Escape:

The poem’s speaker longs to dissolve into the nightingale’s timeless song:

“O for a draught of vintage...

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen” (Keats 11–14).

This desire is a Freudian reclamation of the pleasure principle—an attempt to transcend pain. Yet the abrupt return to consciousness (“Forlorn! The very word is like a bell...”) reveals the

impossibility of permanent escape. Lacanian theory reads this as desire's inevitable failure: the Real of mortality calls the subject back.

2. *La Belle Dame sans Merci*: Desire and Destruction:

The knight's enchantment by the mysterious woman symbolizes desire's dangerous allure:

"La Belle Dame sans Merci hath thee in thrall!" (Keats 40).

The knight's collapse into barrenness suggests the Freudian compulsion toward repetition and the death drive. Lacanian lack becomes fatal here: the beloved is an unattainable object, leading not to fulfillment but annihilation.

3. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: Desire Frozen in Time:

The urn stages idealized forms of beauty, yet they remain forever unfulfilled:

"Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss..." (Keats 17).

Desire here is eternal but incomplete—preserved yet denied. Lacan's theory perfectly maps this paradox: the lover is caught between desire and impossibility, revealing beauty as a perpetual reminder of lack.

The Shadow of Mortality: Existential Anxiety in Keats' Work:

Keats' confrontation with death defines his poetic consciousness.

1. *When I Have Fears*: Fear of Symbolic Death:

The fear of dying before achieving poetic greatness is evident:

"Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain..." (Keats 1).

This aligns with the psychoanalytic fear of symbolic annihilation—the dread of leaving no legacy.

2. *Ode to a Nightingale*: Yearning for Immortality:

The nightingale becomes a symbol of eternal life:

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" (Keats 61).

The contrast between human finitude and the bird's perceived permanence evokes Lacan's *Real*: the truth of death that ruptures desire.

3. *To Autumn*: Sublimation and Acceptance

Autumn embodies ripeness tinged with decay:

"Soft-dying day..." (Keats 25).

Freud's notion of sublimation appears here—death is aestheticized, transformed into beauty, suggesting partial reconciliation with mortality.

5. The Interplay of Desire, Anxiety, and Mortality: A Comparative Analysis:

Across the selected poems, several patterns emerge:

1. Desire as Escape vs. Desire as Threat:

Poem	Desire's Function	Psychoanalytic Interpretation
<i>Ode to a Nightingale</i>	Escape from mortality	Pleasure principle vs. death drive
<i>La Belle Dame sans Merci</i>	Seduction and destruction	Desire arising from lack
<i>Ode on a Grecian Urn</i>	Eternalized yet unfulfilled	Symbolic representation of <i>objet petit a</i>

2. Mortality as Fear vs. Mortality as Acceptance

Poem	Treatment of Mortality	Interpretation
<i>When I Have Fears</i>	Fear of symbolic death	Anxiety over unfulfilled identity
<i>Ode to a Nightingale</i>	Flight from the Real	Trauma of human limitation
<i>To Autumn</i>	Acceptance through sublimation	Transforming fear into beauty

3. Unified Psychological Landscape

Together, these poems reveal:

- Beauty as both remedy and reminder,
- Desire as both creative and destructive,
- Mortality as both terrifying and inevitable.

Keats' imagination becomes a site where the psyche oscillates between yearning and dread—between what Freud calls *Eros* (life drive) and *Thanatos* (death drive).

6. Discussion:

The psychoanalytic reading of John Keats' selected poems reveals a profound and intricately woven relationship between desire, mortality, and existential anxiety—one that reflects both the

poet's inner psychological landscape and the universal complexities of human consciousness. Across his major works, Keats creates a poetic world where longing is never simple, beauty is never without sorrow, and every attempt to escape vulnerability ultimately leads back to an awareness of human finitude. In this context, the psychoanalytic frameworks of Freud and Lacan prove remarkably useful for decoding the emotional, symbolic, and philosophical tensions embedded within Keats' poetry.

A central theme emerging from the analysis is the inherent **ambivalence of desire**. In poems such as *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, desire is portrayed as a force that elevates the human spirit yet simultaneously exposes the limitations imposed by mortality. Through a Freudian lens, this oscillation between pleasure and pain reflects the conflict between the **pleasure principle**—the desire for escape, union, and ecstasy—and the **reality principle**, which anchors the subject to material existence and suffering. Lacan's notion of desire as fundamentally rooted in **lack** becomes equally significant: the subject's longing for the eternal beauty of the nightingale or the frozen lovers of the urn highlights the impossibility of fully attaining the desired object (*objet petit a*). Thus, Keats' desire is always bittersweet—intense, transformative, yet perpetually unfulfilled.

The discussion also highlights how **mortality functions as both a threat and an anchor** in Keats' poetic consciousness. In *When I Have Fears*, mortality is experienced as an existential urgency—an impending interruption of creative potential and emotional fulfillment. The fear of symbolic death, or the erasure of one's identity through unfinished work, aligns closely with psychoanalytic concerns about legacy, self-preservation, and psychological continuity. Meanwhile, *To Autumn* presents a contrasting emotional register: although the season symbolizes decline and approach of death, Keats uses sublimation—a Freudian defense mechanism—to transform decay into harmony, beauty, and meaning. This demonstrates a maturing poetic acceptance wherein death becomes not merely a source of anxiety but a profound component of the natural cycle.

A third pattern observed is the **interplay between imagination and reality** as a coping mechanism for existential fear. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, the speaker's imaginative flight into the idealized world of the bird reflects both a desire for transcendence and the psychological need for escape from suffering. However, the abrupt return to the "sole self"—a moment of disillusionment—exposes the limits of imagination. This phenomenon can be viewed through Lacan's distinction between the **Imaginary** (the realm of fantasy) and the **Real** (the inescapable truth of mortality).

Keats' repeated return from fantasy to awareness signifies the confrontation with the Real, the traumatic core that cannot be symbolized or escaped.

Similarly, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* dramatizes the destructive side of desire when it becomes fixated on an elusive, idealized figure. The knight's enthrallment by the "faery's child" evokes Lacan's theory of desire's endless circulation—its tendency to pursue unattainable objects that offer momentary satisfaction yet ultimately produce emptiness and despair. The "death-pale" kings and warriors who warn the knight foreshadow the psychoanalytic recognition that excessive longing for the ideal leads not to fulfillment but to psychological exhaustion and existential ruin. These analyses collectively suggest that Keats' poetry does not merely describe emotions—it enacts the very psychological tensions it explores. His poems create spaces where the reader can witness the mind negotiating between attraction and fear, pleasure and dissolution, immortality and decay. Keats' artistic genius lies in his ability to translate these universal human conflicts into rich sensuous imagery, musical language, and symbolic landscapes that continue to resonate across generations.

From a broader perspective, this psychoanalytic interpretation underscores how Keats' work remains relevant to contemporary discussions of human psychology, creativity, and emotional experience. Desire in Keats is not simply romantic or aesthetic—it is existential. Mortality is not simply an end—it is a shaping force. His poems reveal the vulnerability at the heart of human aspiration, highlighting how the pursuit of beauty becomes both a refuge from and a reminder of the inevitability of death. The study demonstrates that Keats' poetic imagination offers profound insights into the emotional architecture of being human: the yearning to transcend limitations, the fear of impermanence, and the lingering hope for meaning amidst uncertainty.

In strengthening this interpretive model, the discussion also affirms that psychoanalytic theory enriches our reading of Romantic poetry by unveiling dimensions of the self that are not immediately visible on the surface. Keats becomes, through this lens, not only a poet of beauty but also a poet of psychological depth—one whose works map the subconscious terrain of desire and dread with extraordinary sensitivity. His poetry invites readers to confront their own inner struggles, suggesting that the human psyche finds both suffering and Result

7. Results:

The psychoanalytic exploration of John Keats' selected poems reveals several significant findings that illuminate the intricate relationship between desire, mortality, and existential anxiety in his poetic imagination. The analysis demonstrates that Keats consistently employs sensuous imagery, symbolic structures, and emotional oscillations to express deep psychological tensions rooted in the human unconscious. The major results of the study are outlined below:

1. Desire in Keats' Poetry Operates as an Ambivalent Psychological Force

The study reveals that Keats portrays desire as both uplifting and destabilizing.

- In *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, desire appears as a longing for transcendence and aesthetic perfection.
- In *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, desire becomes destructive, leading to abandonment and emotional depletion.

This ambivalence aligns with **Freud's pleasure principle** and **Lacan's notion of desire-as-lack**, confirming that Keats' longing always carries within it a residue of anxiety and unfulfillment.

2. Keats' Poetic Treatment of Mortality Reflects Core Psychoanalytic Concepts:

The analysis clearly establishes that Keats' intense focus on death, transience, and decay reflects key Freudian ideas such as the **death drive (Todestrieb)**.

- *When I Have Fears* demonstrates anxiety about an incomplete life and unfinished creativity.
- *To Autumn* shows a sublimated, peaceful acceptance of death through natural cycles.

The results indicate that mortality is not merely a theme but a psychological foundation structuring Keats' worldview.

3. A Recurrent Tension between Imagination and Reality Shapes Keats' Psychological Landscape

The study finds that Keats uses imagination as both an escape and a coping mechanism, yet ultimately accepts its limitations.

- The flight into the nightingale's world is disrupted by a return to the "sole self," signaling the collapse of fantasy before the **Lacanian Real**.
- Art on the Grecian Urn freezes beauty but denies fulfillment, proving that imagination preserves desire without satisfying it.

Thus, reality repeatedly intrudes upon fantasy, creating emotional dissonance characteristic of psychoanalytic conflict.

4. Keats' Poetry Consistently Embodies Dualities: Beauty/Decay, Fulfillment/Loss, Life/Death

The study identifies that Keats' work is structured around oppositional forces that symbolically reflect the divided human psyche.

These dualities are most prominent in:

- The immortal bird vs. mortal man (*Ode to a Nightingale*),
- Eternal lovers vs. living lovers (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*),
- Seductive ideal vs. emotional ruin (*La Belle Dame sans Merci*).

The results confirm that Keats' poetic dualities parallel Freud's opposition between **Eros (life-drive)** and **Thanatos (death-drive)**.

5. Keats' Personal Experience Deepens the Psychological Tones of His Poetry

The analysis confirms that Keats' biography—marked by illness, loss, and awareness of early death—significantly shapes the emotional intensity of his poetry. His fear of dying young, combined with his longing for creative immortality, emerges repeatedly in:

- *When I Have Fears*,
- *Ode to a Nightingale*,
- His letters and poetic reflections.

These findings support psychoanalytic interpretations that link personal trauma to symbolic expression in literature.

6. Psychoanalytic Theory Provides a Cohesive Framework That Unites Keats' Thematic Preoccupations

The study reveals that Freud and Lacan offer powerful tools to explain the underlying emotional structure of Keats' poetry.

Through this framework, Keats' work is shown to express:

- unconscious longing,
- idealized desire,
- fear of oblivion,

- the impossibility of complete fulfillment,
- and the constant interplay between beauty and annihilation.

Thus, the results confirm that Keats' poetry forms a unified psychological narrative shaped by desire, anxiety, and mortality.

Summary of Results:

Key Finding	Psychoanalytic Insight	Supporting Poems
Desire is ambivalent and bittersweet	Desire-as-lack; pleasure principle	<i>Nightingale, Grecian Urn, Belle Dame</i>
Mortality shapes Keats' worldview	Death drive; sublimation	<i>When I Have Fears, To Autumn</i>
Imagination fails before reality	The Real; collapse of fantasy	<i>Nightingale</i>
Beauty coexists with decay	Eros vs Thanatos	<i>Grecian Urn, Belle Dame</i>
Personal biography informs his anxiety	Trauma, early death fears	Letters, <i>When I Have Fears</i>
Psychoanalysis unifies Keats' themes	Unconscious desire and fear	Across all poems

8.0 Conclusion:

This psychoanalytic exploration demonstrates that John Keats' poetry constitutes a rich psychological terrain shaped by conflicting desires, fears, and longings. His oeuvre dramatizes the paradox of craving beauty while being painfully aware of life's impermanence. Through Freud and Lacan, Keats' poems appear not merely as aesthetic works but as psychological documents revealing the unconscious tensions that structure human existence.

Ode to a Nightingale and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* display how desire reaches toward transcendence yet collapses before mortality's truth. *La Belle Dame sans Merci* warns of desire's destructive potential, while *When I Have Fears* exposes anxiety over the limits of time and creation. *To Autumn* finally gestures toward an aesthetic resolution, sublimating death into beauty.

Keats thus offers profound insight into the universal human struggle to reconcile longing with limitation. His poetic “bittersweet cadence” continues to echo because it speaks to the timeless conflicts that define the human psyche.

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