

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Night Poetry As A Mean Of Literary Fiction

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Abstract

This article examines Night Thoughts by Edward Young as a major work of English literature distinguished by its philosophical depth, emotional intensity, and innovative poetic method. It explores the poem's structure as a sequence of nocturnal meditations, the thematic unity of the first four Nights, and the moral and spiritual vision that underlies Young's reflections on life, death, immortality, and eternity. Particular attention is given to the poem's experiential origin in personal loss, its rejection of superficial melancholy in favor of hope and renewal, and its symbolic treatment of detachment from worldly illusion. The article also considers the significance of key figures such as Narcissa, the historical reception of the poem, and its gradual decline into obscurity despite early acclaim. Ultimately, the study argues for Night Thoughts as a work that transforms private grief into a universal meditation on moral reformation and enduring human concerns.

KEY WORDS

Edward Young, Night Thoughts, eighteenth-century poetry, meditation, death and immortality, moral renewal, grief and consolation, English literature.

INTRODUCTION

Edward Young's Night Thoughts stands as one of the most remarkable achievements in English literature of the past three centuries. Across the entire span of this distinguished tradition, only the works of William Shakespeare and Paradise Lost by John Milton can be said to surpass it in artistic merit. In the poem's preface, Edward Young explains that the inspiration for the work was drawn from real events, and the characters Philander and Narcissa have often—perhaps too hastily—been identified with Mr. and Mrs. Temple. Another interpretation suggests that Philander was modeled on Thomas Tickell, a close friend of Young who died three months after Lady Elizabeth Young. Some readers have interpreted the skeptical figure of Lorenzo as a representation of Young's own son; however, this claim is generally rejected, since the child was only eight years old at the time of the poem's publication.[5] The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life,

Death, and Immortality was first published in 1742, with additional "Nights" appearing later, the eighth and ninth being issued in 1745.

METHOD

This article employs a qualitative, text-centered critical approach to the study of Night Thoughts by Edward Young. Close reading forms the primary method of analysis, focusing on the poem's language, imagery, structure, and thematic development across the first four Nights. Particular attention is given to shifts in tone, mode, and situation in order to illuminate how Young's meditative method departs from conventional narrative poetry and allows moral insight to arise organically from lived experience.

In addition, the study adopts a historical-contextual method,

situating *Night Thoughts* within the intellectual, religious, and literary conventions of the eighteenth century. This includes consideration of contemporary practices such as poetic dedication, religious meditation, and moral didacticism, as well as the poem's reception history from its initial acclaim to its later decline and partial rediscovery.

The article also draws on comparative and intertextual analysis, examining Young's use of universal religious and mythic motifs—such as death, rebirth, and moral transformation—and relating them to classical, biblical, and philosophical traditions referenced in the poem. Finally, selected secondary sources and critical commentaries are consulted to engage with established interpretations and to position the present analysis within existing scholarship. Through this combination of close textual analysis, historical context, and critical dialogue, the study aims to offer a balanced and coherent interpretation of *Night Thoughts* as a work of enduring literary and philosophical significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Young's *Night Thoughts* was brought back into critical awareness after a long period of neglect when it was cited by Edmund Blunden in his World War One memoir, *Undertones of War* (1928), where he described it as a source of solace during his time in the trenches. Blunden's memoir itself later gained renewed attention through Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, which examined Blunden's dependence on *Night Thoughts*. [2] Through this chain of literary rediscovery, Young's poem was reintroduced to students of English literature as a striking, occasionally grandiose forerunner of early Romanticism.

Samuel Richardson, in a letter to the bookseller Andrew Millar, discussed a new edition of Young's poem *Night Thoughts*, which was already very popular and would become one of the most frequently printed poems of the eighteenth century. Millar had purchased the copyright to the second volume of *Night Thoughts* from Young for £63 on 7 April 1749; the edition under discussion was the first in which Millar was involved, and it was advertised for sale in the *General Advertiser* on 30 January 1750.[6]

William Hutchinson included a gloss on *Night Thoughts* in his series of lectures *The Spirit of Masonry* (1775), underlining the masonic symbolism of the text.[4]

The work, *Night Thoughts*, published in installments from 1742 to 1744, enjoyed immense popularity for a century

afterward. Not only a literary masterpiece but also a sublime philosophical and Christian devotional work, it held a respected place alongside the family Bible on Christian bookshelves.

Night Thoughts consists of nine long poetic reflections, each framed as occurring over the course of a single night. Young released the poem gradually, beginning with Night I in 1742. After completing the first four Nights, he suggested that the work might be extended further, as it eventually was, yet he also made it clear that these initial four form a self-contained and unified whole. In the present edition, we therefore include only Nights I–IV. One motivation for omitting the later Nights is to reach the broadest possible audience, since a more extensive text might discourage some contemporary readers.

As mentioned above, *Night Thoughts* is structured as a sequence of poetic meditations imagined as taking place over nine successive nights. The opening three Nights together comprise what Young terms the Complaint, in which he confronts the central anxieties, pains, and contradictions of human existence. In the fourth Night, this Complaint is brought toward resolution: Young maintains that life, despite its sufferings and ordeals, possesses genuine worth and the potential for goodness, but only for the individual who has been morally transformed through sincere religious conviction and a disciplined philosophical perspective.[12, 8]

Following the literary customs of the eighteenth century, Young prefaced each of the first four Nights with a dedication to a person of rank or influence. While such gestures might strike modern readers as self-serving, they were standard practice in Young's day. Notably, he handled this convention with a measure of restraint, refraining from lavish praise of unworthy figures, a failing that was far from rare among his peers. Accordingly, Night I was dedicated to Arthur Onslow; Night II to Spencer Compton; Night III to Margaret Harley Bentinck; and Night IV to Philip Yorke.

Young structures the poem around a series of designated nights, each devoted to weighty moral and philosophical concerns. The range of subjects addressed in *Night Thoughts* is remarkably broad and ambitious. As the nineteenth-century critic George Gilfillan observed, the poem encompasses themes of profound and universal significance: humanity and its condition; the nature of the world; ambition and pleasure; skepticism and faith; immortality and death; judgment, heaven, and hell; as well as the vast ideas of the stars and eternity itself.[3]

To orient one's life toward the Eternal does not, as is often mistakenly supposed, require harsh asceticism or rigid moral legalism. Nor does it entail viewing existence as nothing more than a sorrowful passage, or embracing a dualistic rejection of the body and the world. Instead, it reflects a holistic vision of life, one that affirms the continuity between temporal existence and eternity and upholds the possibility of fulfillment in both realms. By refusing to cling to or obsess over worldly pleasures, one is paradoxically able to enjoy them more genuinely, free from distortion or excess.

The aim, then, is not to despise the world, but to cultivate detachment from it. It is not the world itself that is condemned, but the bondage created by attachment and dependence. The philosophically reformed individual accepts pleasures as they arise, without craving or possessiveness, and without allowing them to be corrupted by egoism or fixation.

Such moral renewal is also expressed through enduring religious and mythic patterns centered on death followed by rebirth into a higher, immortal mode of being. This symbolism underlies the ethical meaning of the Fall of Adam; the journeys narrated in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*; Plato's Chariot Allegory; and the descent and return of the soul in the *Republic* (the Myth of Er). It also appears in the Mystery Religions, in the symbolic dimensions of resurrection and reincarnation, and in the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, often misleadingly referred to by that title rather than its proper name, *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*.

Night Thoughts is often described as a melancholy work, but this judgment rests on a shallow reading. At its core, the poem conveys a message of hope, vitality, and affirmation. Young's personal grief and sorrow are transformed into something elevated and life-giving. Death—understood not as annihilation but as death to the false attractions and illusions of the world—becomes the threshold to true Life. In this sense, *Night Thoughts* is not a poem of despair, but one of profound spiritual renewal.

The significance of the work was widely recognized from the moment of its publication and for roughly a century thereafter. During this period it appeared in numerous editions and was frequently reprinted. Interest in the poem reached its height in the 1850s, when several major new editions were issued in close succession. After this peak, however, its popularity declined abruptly. Only a handful of reprints appeared in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and by the twentieth

century the work had fallen into near obscurity.[6]

Night Thoughts by Edward Young unfolds through a wide range of situations and modes of expression across its individual Nights. Each Night differs in tone, emphasis, and perspective, and an understanding of the poem's overall structure requires attention to the shifting situations, themes, and characters that shape these sections. [7] Because the poem arose from real personal experiences rather than from a fictional design, its method was largely dictated by the thoughts and emotions that unexpectedly presented themselves to the author at the time of composition, rather than by a carefully preplanned scheme.

This origin becomes evident from the poem's character, which departs from the conventional poetic approach of extended narrative followed by concise moral conclusions. Instead, Young reverses this pattern, allowing reflection and moral insight to emerge directly from the immediacy of lived experience. This literary work engages with one of the most compelling and profound subjects in English literature—human mortality and the search for enduring meaning—which is why the poem holds a distinctive place worthy of close analysis.

Particular attention should be given to the figure of Narcissa, a central character in *Night III*. She is portrayed as exceptionally beautiful and morally virtuous, embodying an ideal of womanhood. Within the poem, Narcissa is presented as the poet's stepdaughter, and her death is depicted with intense emotional depth. Through this portrayal, Young gives powerful expression to his personal grief, transforming private loss into a moving and reflective poetic meditation.

CONCLUSION

Night Thoughts emerges as a work of remarkable philosophical depth and emotional power, one that transcends the label of mere melancholy to offer a vision grounded in hope, moral renewal, and spiritual affirmation. Through its distinctive structure of nocturnal meditations, its engagement with universal themes such as life, death, immortality, and eternity, and its deeply personal origins in loss and grief, Edward Young transforms individual suffering into a timeless exploration of the human condition. The poem's varied modes, reflective method, and symbolic figures—most notably Narcissa—underscore its sincerity and experiential authenticity. Though its popularity has fluctuated over time, *Night Thoughts* remains a significant and rewarding work of

English literature, deserving renewed attention for its capacity to unite moral philosophy, religious insight, and poetic intensity into a coherent and enduring whole.

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