

The Life Of Edward Young And His Fictional Heritage

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Abstract: This article explores the milestones of Edward Young's life and analyzes the fictional and poetic heritage he left behind particularly the psychological and spiritual depth that has influenced the Gothic and Romantic literary traditions. The study also examines how Young's personal grief and religious beliefs shaped his writing. Methodologically, the paper employs literary-historical analysis, thematic interpretation, and intertextual comparison.

Keywords: Edward Young, Dark Romanticism, Gothic and Romantic traditions, Satires, dramatic works, moral poetry.

Introduction: Edward Young (1683–1765), an English poet, dramatist, and cleric, is best known for his philosophical and meditative poem *Night Thoughts*. His life and literary works, deeply embedded in the cultural and religious landscape of 18th-century England, reflect profound meditations on mortality, immortality, human suffering, and divine justice. Edward Young is a figure whose literary contributions remain critical to understanding the evolution of English moral poetry and early pre-Romantic sensibilities. Though often overshadowed by canonical giants like Milton or Blake, Young's *Night Thoughts* remains a masterpiece that shaped philosophical and psychological dimensions in English verse. His work anticipates the darker moods of the Romantic age, influencing writers such as William Blake, Mary Shelley, and even Goethe.

Edward Young was born on July 3, 1683, in Upham, Hampshire, England. His father, also named Edward Young, who was a clergyman, later became the Dean of Salisbury. Young was educated at Winchester College and later at New College and Corpus Christi College, Oxford, eventually obtaining a Doctor of Civil Law degree.

In his early career, Young sought advancement through both literature and political patronage. He wrote dedications and flattering poems to prominent aristocrats in hopes of gaining favor. Despite this, he often failed to receive the posts or pensions he hoped for.

"Death (said he) has been of late walking around us,

and making breach upon breach upon us and has now carried away the head of this body with a stroke; so that he, whom you saw a week ago distributing the holy mysteries, is now laid in the dust. But he still lives in the many excellent directions he has left us, both how to live and how to die." [1; 14]

In 1731, Young married Lady Elizabeth Lee, widow of Colonel Lee and daughter of the Earl of Lichfield. The couple lived a relatively quiet life until a series of personal tragedies struck. His wife, her daughter, and her son-in-law all died within a short span. These losses deeply affected Young and became the emotional and spiritual basis for his magnum opus, *Night Thoughts*. He spent his later years as rector of Welwyn in Hertfordshire, where he continued to write and reflect until his death in 1765. He died at his Parsonage House at Welwyn on April 12, 1765, and was buried, according to his desire, by the side of his lady, under the altarpiece of that church, which is said to be ornamented in a singular manner with an elegant piece of needlework by Lady Young and some appropriate inscriptions painted by the direction of the doctor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

He began with satirical and dramatic works, Young's true legacy lies in his meditative and religious poetry. His major works include

Early Works and Satires

1. *The Last Day* (1713): A religious poem meditating on the Apocalypse. It was written in 1710 but not published until 1713. It was dedicated to the Queen

and acknowledges an obligation that has been differently understood, either as referring to her having been his godmother or his patron, for it is inferred from a couple of Swift's that Young was a pensioned advocate of government:

“Whence Gay was banish’d in disgrace,
Where Pope will never show his face,
Where Y must torture his invention,
To flatter knaves, or lose his pension.” [3, 5]

2. The Force of Religion (1714) was founded on the deaths of Lady Jane Grey and her husband. It is written with elegance enough, according to Johnson but was “never popular” for Jane is too heroic to be pitied.

The dedication of this piece to the Countess of Salisbury was also inexcusably fulsome, and I think, profane. Indeed, the author himself seems afterwards to have thought so, for when he collected his smaller pieces into volumes, he very judiciously suppressed this and most of his other dedications.

3. The Universal Passion (1725–1728): A series of satires criticizing the obsession with fame and materialism. These works positioned Young as a moral critic of his time. Love of Fame, the Universal Passion, a series of satires, critiques vanity and social ambition with a sharp, didactic voice reminiscent of Pope's moral epistles. In seven characteristic satires, originally published separately, between the years 1725 and 1728. This, according to Dr. Johnson, is a very great performance. It is said to be a series of epigrams, and if it is, it is what the author intended: His endeavour was at the production of striking distiches and pointed sentences; his distiches have the weight of solid sentiment, and his points the sharpness of resistless truths. His characters are often selected with discernment and drawn with nicety; his illustrations are often happy, and his reflections often just. His species of satire is between those of Horace and Juvenal; he has the gaiety of Horace without his laxity of numbers and the morality of Juvenal with a greater variety of images. Swift indeed has pronounced of these satires, that they should have been either more merry or more severe; in that case, they might probably have caught the popular taste more, but this does not prove that they would have been better. The opinion of the Duke of Grafton, however, was of more worth than all the opinions of the wits if it be true, as related by Mr. Spence, that his grace presented the author with two thousand pounds. “Two thousand pounds for a poem!” said one of the Duke's friends, to whom his grace replied that he had made an excellent bargain, for he thought them worth four. [2]

The poet wrote a number of dramatic works, including,

1. Busiris, King of Egypt (1719) Tragedies that reflect classical influences, but are often infused with moral and emotional concerns. His first tragedy, Busiris, was at Drury Lane, and he dedicated it to the Duke of Newcastle. This tragedy had been written some years ago, though now it was first performed; for it is to our author's credit that many of his works were laid by him a considerable time before they were obtruded on the public. Our great dramatic critic pronounces this piece too far removed from known life to affect the passions.

2. The Revenge was written in 1721 in particular, remained popular well into the 19th century. The Revenge remains his most notable play, distinguished by its complex villain, Zanga, and themes of racial tension and betrayal. These works enjoyed moderate success on stage, however, they did not earn Young lasting fame in the dramatic realm. Nevertheless, they reveal his early engagement with emotional extremes and ethical dilemmas—concerns that would later dominate his poetic vision. The dramatic character of which is sufficiently ascertained by its still keeping possession of the stage. The hint of this is supposed to have been taken from Othello, but the reflections, the incidents, and the diction are original. [4] The success of this induced him to attempt another tragedy, which was written in 1721 but not brought upon the stage for thirty years afterwards and then without success, as we shall have further occasion to observe.

3. His tragedy of The Brothers (1753), written thirty years before, now first appeared upon the stage. It had been in rehearsal when Young took orders and was withdrawn on that occasion. The Brothers was never a favourite with the public, but so that the society might not suffer, the doctor made up the deficiency from his own pocket.

4. His next was a prose performance, entitled, The Centaur not fabulous; in Six Letters to a Friend on the Life in Vogue. The third of these letters describes the deathbed of the gay, young, noble, ingenious, accomplished, and most wretched Altamont, whom report supposed to be Lord Euston. But whether Altamont or Lorenzo were real or fictitious characters, it is certain the author could be at no loss for models for them among the gay nobility with whom he was acquainted. [5]

5. In 1762, at little before his death, Young published his last and one of his least esteemed poems, “Resignation.”

DISCUSSION

He was known as his masterpiece named Night Thoughts which is the greatest work of English literature to appear in the last 300 years. Indeed, in the

whole history of this exalted literary tradition, only Shakespeare and Milton's Paradise Lost surpass it in excellence. In the preface to the poem Young states that the occasion of the poem was real, and Philander and Narcissa have been rather rashly identified with Mr. and Mrs. Temple. It has also been suggested that Philander represents Thomas Tickell, an old friend of Young's, who died three months after Lady Elizabeth Young. The infidel Lorenzo was thought by some to be a sketch of Young's own son, but he was only eight years old at the time of publication. The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality, was published in 1742, and was followed by other "Nights" the eighth and ninth appearing in 1745.

About the year 1741, he had the unhappiness to lose his wife, her daughter by Colonel Lee, and this daughter's husband, Mr. Temple. What affliction he felt for their loss, may be seen in his Night Thoughts, written on this occasion. They are addressed to Lorenzo, a man of pleasure, and the world, and who, it is generally supposed, was his own son, then laboring under his father's displeasure. His son-in-law is said to be characterized by Philander, and his lady's daughter was certainly the person he speaks of under the appellation of Narcissa. In her last illness, which was a consumption, he accompanied her to Montpellier, or, as Mr. Croft says, to Lyons, in the South of France, at which place she died soon after her arrival. Being regarded as a heretic, she was denied Christian burial, and her afflicted father was obliged to steal a grave and inter her privately with his own hands. [1,22]

In this celebrated poem he thus addresses Death:

"Insatiate archer! Could not one suffice?

Thy shaft flew thrice, and thrice my peace was slain
And thrice, ere thrice yon moon had –fill'd her horn."
[1,23]

These lines have been universally understood of the above deaths, but this supposition can in way be reconciled with Mr. Croft's dates, who says Mrs. Temple died in 1736, Mr. Temple in 1740, and Lady Young in 1741. Which quite inverts the order of the poet, who makes Narcissa's death follow Philander's:

"Narcissa follows e'er his tomb is clos'd." (Night III. line 62) [1, 23]

There is no possible way to reconcile these contradictions: either we must reject Mr. Croft's dates, for which he gives us no authority, or we must suppose the characters and incidents, if not entirely fictitious, as the author assures us that they were not, were accommodated by poetic license to his purpose. As to the character of Lorenzo, whether taken from real life purely in the author's imagination, Mr. Croft has

sufficiently proved that it could not be intended for his son, who was but eight years old when most of the Night Thoughts were written, for Night the Seventh is dated, in the original edition, July 1744.

Consisting of nine "Nights", this long blank-verse poem reflects on death, the soul's immortality, the futility of worldly pleasures, and the search for divine meaning. It is both autobiographical and allegorical, filled with somber images and philosophical introspection. The poem was a major success in its time, translated into multiple languages, and inspired numerous illustrations, including those by William Blake.

This work includes different themes and its unique style.

✓ **Death and Immortality**

Young treats death not with fear, but with philosophical and theological depth. He confronts it as both a personal loss and a universal reality, using it to emphasize the soul's eternal nature.

✓ **Melancholy and Isolation**

The speaker often appears alone, wandering at night. This solitude, both literal and spiritual, becomes a space for deep reflection—prefiguring the Gothic solitude found in later Romantic literature.

✓ **Religious Inquiry and Divine Justice**

Young's faith is deeply Anglican but filled with doubts and questions. His tone is often meditative, using rhetorical questions and dramatic monologues to probe theological concerns.

✓ **Language and Imagery**

He uses rich metaphors, apostrophes, and paradox, weaving a tapestry of cosmic scale. The imagery of night, shadow, tombs, stars, and eternity abounds. The language is elevated, echoing Miltonic grandeur while retaining personal vulnerability.

Edward Young's influence was profound in the 18th and 19th centuries:

- Gothic Literature: Night Thoughts' exploration of the soul, death, and fear laid a psychological foundation for Gothic fiction.
- Romanticism: His spiritual solitude and focus on the individual soul influenced poets such as William Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge.
- Continental Impact: Young's works were translated and widely read in Europe. Goethe and Schiller acknowledged Young's emotional intensity and philosophical concerns. In France and Germany, Night Thoughts was seen as a bridge between classical and modern literature.
- Visual Arts: William Blake's illustrations for

Night Thoughts are among the most iconic artistic engagements with poetry in English literature.

Although not a novelist, Young's fictional heritage lies in the poetic personage he created—a character haunted by grief, struggling toward transcendence. This inner voice became a prototype for Romantic heroes and Byronic figures.

Characters of the poem:

Night Thoughts has the form of a long recitation in first-person voice by an anonymous speaker, whom we take to be Young himself. It is mainly addressed to another figure named Lorenzo. The poem is an exhortation to Lorenzo to virtue and the greatness of the examined, philosophical, religious life.

In the course of the poem two other figures, deceased individuals, Philander and Narcissa are mentioned, and sometimes addressed rhetorically.

The usual view is that all three named figures correspond to actual people in life, and, in some case, the details of the narrative make this view plausible.

Narcissa. The most readily identifiable figure is Narcissa, the primary subject of the Night 3. Narcissa is generally understood to be poet's step-daughter, Elizabeth, who died tragically at age 18 in 1736, not long after her marriage to Henry Temple. She had contracted consumption and was gravely ill. The story is sad, with a desperate Young trying to take his step-daughter to sunnier climes, nice, in France, only for her to die enroute, in Lyons.

Philander. There are two common theories as to the identity of Philander, who is principally addressed in Nights 1 and 2. One is that Philander is the husband of poet's step-daughter, Henry Temple. The second candidate is an old friend of Young's, Thomas Tickell. Both died shortly before Young commenced writing Night Thoughts.

Lorenzo. There are also two main suggestions as to the identity of Lorenzo. One is that he represents Young's son, Frederick. This is arguably made somewhat less plausible by the fact that, at the time Night Thoughts was written, his son was still a boy — and, at the age of 10 years old, neither in need of serious moral reform, nor likely to profit much from the sophisticated reflections on ethics and religion.

A more likely candidate for the worldly Lorenzo, therefore, might be poet's friend and sometimes patron, Duke Philip Wharton. Though Wharton died young, in 1731, Young could easily in his imagination have been addressing his friend in a posthumous, retrospective way. Wharton would be an ideal candidate for such advice. He almost epitomizes the type of the wealthy playboy of the times: an aristocrat,

born into wealth and privilege, intellectually brilliant but without matching morals, squandering his inheritance, alcoholic, dissipated, and debt-ridden.

However, clearly in a broader sense through Lorenzo Young addresses each of his readers. He is exhorting us to moral reformation. Philander and Narcissa likewise are composite figures. The effect of the poem depends on our ability to identify with all these characters. It represents an inner dialogue each reader has amongst these figures as they exist as inner representations and elements of people's own personality and psyche.

In brief, the message of the perennial philosophy, elegantly and persuasively expressed in Night Thoughts, is this: if you set your heart on material goods, then you will find happiness neither in this life nor the next. But if person yearning is for spiritual goods, ones one will gain whatever true happiness is attainable in this life, and will be better suited, with soul enlarged, for far greater happiness in the next.

By placing our divinity and eternal destiny at the fore of interest and attention, our experience of the world is divinized. We see God at work in nature around us. The world comes to life, then, by our 'death' to it. We no longer sully the beauty and miracle of the world by clinging desperately to it. With the doors of perception cleansed, the world is experienced as transfigured, spiritualized, even magical.

Setting one sights on the Eternal does not mean, as is often wrongly assumed, a life of ascetical self-denial or legalistic moralism. It is not the view that life is mere a vale of tears, or a body-denying dualistic rejection of the world. Rather, it is an integral world-view, in that it recognizes and affirms the unity of this life and eternity, and asserts the possibility of happiness in both. Precisely by not yearning for or clinging to the pleasures of this life, one may experience them with greater purity and true enjoyment.

The idea is not to hate the world, but to be indifferent to it. Not to have contempt for the world per se, but to condemn attachment and bondage to it. The philosopher accepts what pleasures cross path, but without yearning for or clinging to them; without their being tainted by admixture of attachment and egoism.

This moral reformation and renewal also find expression in universal religious and mythic motifs of death followed by rebirth in a divine, immortal form. It is the symbolic, ethical meaning of the fall of Adam and Eve; of the Iliad and the Odyssey; of Plato's Chariot Allegory and the descent of the soul in Plotinus; the Mystery Religions; the symbolic meaning of resurrection and reincarnation; of the Egyptian book of coming into day.

It is also the essence of Christian ethics and moral salvation: dying to this life to attain life eternal; putting off the old and putting on the new man; the crucifixion of the fleshly and egoistic will to attain the new, truer, fuller life for which we are meant and destined. This is the Christianity that *Night Thoughts* proclaims. This is the “news that is good.”

Although the perennial philosophy has been expressed many times and it has been done with such grace, elegance, and beauty as this work displays. Part of the work’s uniqueness it is that it avails itself of the inspiration of Night. The inspiration is not only from Apollo, the sun god, God of Delphi, but also from his sister, Artemis, goddess of the moon. This integration of the lunar, the feminine, into the traditionally solar tradition of western philosophy and ethics is itself not without historical significance.

CONCLUSION

Edward Young’s life and literary work form a critical link in the historical evolution of English poetry. Through his reflections on death, immortality, and divine purpose, he anticipated the Romantic era’s turn toward introspection and emotional intensity. His works created a space for personal anguish, spiritual struggle, and metaphysical exploration that later literature would deeply absorb. His *Night Thoughts* remains a monument of metaphysical and psychological literature, demonstrating the enduring power of verse to grapple with the deepest aspects of the human experience. As such, Edward Young’s fictional and poetic legacy is one of philosophical grandeur, spiritual depth, and artistic innovation.

Night Thoughts remains a monument of introspective poetry, bridging the gap between Augustan rationalism and Romantic emotionalism. His legacy endures as one of emotional honesty, theological questioning, and poetic grandeur.

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