

Journal of Social Signs Review

Lexical Choices and Thematic Depth in John Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*

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Abstract

This paper entails a thorough stylistic mapping of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, focusing on the level of vocabulary Ideational G. Analyzing the choice of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, in particular, should show how lexical choices made by Keats help the reader understand the depth of the poem. This analysis demonstrates how a specific noun like 'nightingale,' 'death' and 'dream' conveys nature, death and escapism from the poem respectively. In contrast, verbs like 'fade,' 'flee' and 'dissolve' used by Keats continue to impress on the reader the ephemeral nature of life. While adjectives associated with Keats's work like 'immortal', and 'melancholy', created a sense of longing within the reader, they also created melancholy. 'Softly', 'half', and many other adverbs are looked at to determine the role they play in raising a sense of suspension and reflection within the reader. Such words stand out in capturing the audience's emotions and communicating the poem's message on the impermanence in life and the quest for something beyond. Although *Ode to a Nightingale* has already been the focus of numerous studies, this paper attempts to devise a new approach that has not been tried before by narrowing the scope to the impact of Keats' word selection on the tone, images and ideas of the poem. A case study approach was embraced in this

paper by building on existing literature. From the analysis, it is clear that the choice of words in the poems as used by Keats enhances the quality of the meanings and themes of the poems thus bringing the readers closer to issues of mortality and the wish to flee from it.

Keywords: Adjectives, Imagery, Lexical Choices, Nouns, Verbs

Introduction

One of the finest romantic poems, John Keats's Ode to a Nightingale is highly regarded due to its deep interaction with imagination, nature, and the complexities of human life. First published in the year 1819, the poem remains one of the important texts in the romantic era as it offers an evocative exploration of mortality, beauty, and escapism (Khan et al., 2023). What makes this piece of poetry unique is Keats's meticulous selection of verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, meaning his lexical choices which along with defining the tone and imagery craft deep resonance at the strata of the theme too (Sadiq, 2024). While there has been extensive research on the multifarious themes of Ode to a Nightingale, there is a much-needed lack of research that focuses on and analyses Keats's lexicon choice as a dominant means of crafting the tone, imagery, and ideas in the poem. In filling that gap, this study makes use of the Ideational Meta-function framework of Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) by conducting a more stylistic analysis of the selection of words by Keats and its effect on the themes of the poem.

The Ideational Meta-function framework highlights what Keats's word choices within the poem encapsulate. Halliday and Matthiessen's framework stresses the importance of language in creating meanings out of experience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). It is a framework that analyzes the semantics and syntax of words and deepens understanding of how language captures human experience and thoughts. Regarding Ode to a Nightingale, the Ideational Metafunction framework makes it possible to show systematically, that Keats's

choice of words relates to the themes and emotions of the poem (Zhou, 2024). This system treats the richness of language used by the poet in his memories and feelings, signalling romantic literature enables the capture of the relationship between language and its meaning.

The poem addresses universal issues from a unique viewpoint, such as the beauty and pain of life's fleeting nature, the imagination, escapism, and, ultimately, death. The Nightingale is a timeless, enduring entity that suggests a form of beauty which stands in sharp contrast to the world's transitory state (Ziouch, 2022). The poem is particularly thematically interesting because of the caring attachment that lies between death and immortality and its beautiful Keatsian wordings are expressions of that desire. Moving from despair to hope, longing to acceptance, (Wang & Zhou, 2022). The repetition of important nouns and verbs expresses key messages, while the adjectives and adverbs heightened the emotional and sensual tone of the poem. This essay focuses on Michael's Choices made on the micro-layer of vocabulary and proclaims that these selections are the source of the emotions and the themes and imagery of the entire work.

It is expected that the results of this research have yielded a fresh understanding of Keats's stylistic choices along with stylistics as a discipline itself. Despite all of the existing critical works on Ode to a Nightingale, most do not comprehensively focus on its stylistic examination, which capitalizes on the impact of verbs on the lexicon (Behnam & Kazemian, 2013). This study aims to fill the void between a linguistic analysis and a literary interpretation by employing the Ideational Metafunction approach which focuses on word choice that elaborates on the author's perspective (He, 2019). Moreover, this work furthers the discussion of the dialogue between language and its significance in a piece of literature, marking another area where stylistic criticism is still relevant today.

This research is timely as it coincides with the increased attention to the interface of linguistics and literature. With the advent of digital technologies and the

expansion of stylistics into the realm of computation, text-focused, mixed-method analyses that Malik (2023) regards as vital are becoming increasingly common. This work on the lexical choices in *Ode to a Nightingale* further contributes to the new trends in literary linguistics by paying attention to the rich interpretations in traditional literary critique. Furthermore, the focus on the relationship between language and meaning resonates with the wider conversations in the humanities regarding language and its impact on the construction of human concepts and experiences.

This study attempts to explain the linguistic and thematic features of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* in a new light by showing how the poet's choice of words creates more emotions within the reader. The research follows the Ideational Meta-function Approach, which allows for semiotic analysis of how such components as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs function in the aesthetic and thematic frame of the poem (Zhou, 2024). This enables our understanding of Keats' style of poetry to be further expanded while also proving that stylistics still has great significance in the field of literature. All in all, this analysis intends to provide further validity to the concept of language within literature, more specifically how the order and the selection of words shape a poem from mere text into an extensive study of humanity.

Research Questions

1. How do the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in *Ode to a Nightingale* shape the poem's tone, imagery, and thematic depth?
2. In what ways do Keats's specific word choices in *Ode to a Nightingale* convey the ideas of mortality, nature, and escapism?

Literature Review

Stylistic analysis of poetry has been Various researchers have conducted a stylistic investigation of the poem, 'Ode to a Nightingale,' to appreciate its issues and language. Khan et al., (2023) give a general stylistic interpretation of the poem and

pay attention to its structural and linguistic features. They account for the importance of Keats's diction in his poetry, but they do not delve into the vocabulary which gives the poem its thematic substance. Similarly, Sadiq (2024) thinks of the modern essence in the poem's style and how its elements make it useful in present-day discourse, but once again, he does so without a thorough lexical breakdown. Abbas and Sadiq (2024) continue the conversation, but their work, too, does not depart from the discussion of style as a whole, leaving out the scope of the influence of the choice of words.

One of the most important ones is that of Alfiansyah et al. (2015) who focus on the analysis of the lexical style of Keats' three poems, particularly 'Ode to a Nightingale.' Distinguished by their ability to group lexical choices into patterns, they do not care to analyze the impact the choices have on the theme. Shotova-Nikolenko (2020) takes the novel approach of analyzing the onomastic aspect of Keats' odes, particularly the reference and allusion in the poem recalling their important symbolic value.

Behnam and Kazemian (2013) revealed the versatility of Hallidayan analysis in different genres, as they investigate and contrast the ideational grammatical metaphor in scientific texts and political speeches. Zhou (2024) and He (2019) examined the English ideational metaphor respectively which allowed for a glimpse into the world of metaphor and how it gives meaning. Malik (2023) highlighted the cross-register function of metaphor in the ideational grammatical metaphor in the Saraiki language. Zezhou's work in 2022 pursued semantic categorizations in linguistic structures that help in understanding the descriptions used by Keats. Keats supplemented the literary world with English odes and therefore serves as a primary material to study and analyze without commentary. Ziouch (2022) looks into ecocriticism in Ode to a Nightingale and To Autumn deepening into the usage of the English language by Keats, which adds value to

the continuing discussion on the themes presented by him, however, fails to engage the dialectal analysis of words used.

A gap remains in directly connecting the rich research done on Ode to a Nightingale with the thematic depth and lexical choice using the Ideational Meta-function framework. Research already done lacks focus on the stylistic choices served in advance or thematic analysis and contains a completely different perspective. Therefore, this research seeks to fill that gap by categorically examining how the selection of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in the work of Keats enhances the poem's tone, imagery, and thematic resonance. While previous studies look into the stylistic and thematic aspects of the Ode to a Nightingale, none of them have attempted to study its text-mining methodologies through the Ideational Meta-function framework. This study seeks to address this gap by looking at how Keats's linguistic choices aid in building the thematic depth of the poem. Doing so helps us understand better the implication of his work on stylistic studies and delve deeper into the artistry Keats weaves into his poetry.

Methodology

The Ideational meta-function framework has an important role in the study of Keats's word choices and diction. Halliday and Matthiessen created this framework which highlights the language that enables people to create meanings within different contexts. Specifically, the framework provides a means to analyze semantics and syntax, thus providing insights into the Cultural, social, and political views of the people and their works. In the case of Ode to a Nightingale, the Ideational Meta-function framework in particular helps in detailing Keats' word diction that functions in the thematic and emotional expression of the poem. This not only helps to reveal Keats' exceptional skill as a poet but also reveals the relationship between words and their meanings in the poetry of the Romantics.

The Ideational meta-function framework proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) is a key component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which

describes language to convey meaning. It focuses on language representing the world, categorizing meanings into two main branches: Experiential and Logical. Below is a simplified explanation of this framework.

The Ideational Meta-Function Framework

Experiential Meta function: This aspect represents the world and encompasses how we use language to express experiences, actions, events, and states. It focuses on the participants (who), processes (what happens), and circumstances (where, when, why).

Participants: The entities involved in the action (e.g., actor, recipient).

Processes: The actions or events (e.g., material, mental, relational).

Circumstances: The context of the action (e.g., time, place, manner).

Logical Meta-function: This part connects clauses and represents relationships between ideas, helping to structure the information and show how different pieces of meaning relate to one another. It includes concepts like coordination and subordination.

Table 1: *Structural Elements of the Ideational Meta Function in Linguistic Analysis*

Ideational Meta function	Components	Subcategories
Experiential Meta function	Participants	- Actor
		- Goal
		- Phenomenon
	Processes	- Material
		- Mental
		- Relational
		- Behavioural
	Circumstances	- Location
		- Time

		- Manner
Logical Meta function	Connections	- Coordination
		- Subordination

Discussion and Findings

The poem is rich in lexical choices and their multiple roles by using a variety of linguistic expressions.

Table 2: *Lexical Choices and Their Multifaceted Role in Ode to a Nightingale*

Component	Lexical Choices	Effects on Tone	Imagery	Thematic Depth
Participants	- Nightingale	Evokes a sense of beauty and transcendence	Represents nature's eternal song and freedom	Symbolizes the desire for escape and immortality
	- Death	Conveys somberness and inevitability	Juxtaposition with life and nature	Highlights the inevitability of mortality
	- Dream	Suggests aspiration and longing	Creates a surreal quality	Reflects the tension between reality and desire
Processes	- Fade	Implies gradual loss	Visualises the ephemeral nature of life	Reinforces themes of transience and decay
	- Flee	Suggests urgency and	Evokes a sense of	Captures the yearning to

		escape	movement	escape from
			and liberation	reality
	- Dissolve	Indicates a	Evokes	Connects to
		merging or	fluidity and	themes of
		disappearance	the passage of	impermanence
			time	and change
Circumstances	- Softly	Creates a	Enhances the	Links to
		gentle,	sensory	themes of
		soothing tone	experience	tranquility
				amidst chaos
	- Half	Implies	Suggests	Reflects the
		incompleteness	ambiguity and	struggle
		or uncertainty	partiality	between desire
				and fulfillment
	- In the	Establishes a	Evokes rich	Ties to the
	forest	natural setting	imagery of	theme of
			nature and	nature as a
			seclusion	refuge

The table places Keats's lexical preferences in an order based on Participants (Nouns), Processes (Verbs), and Circumstances (Adverbs/Prepositional Phrases), thus dividing it into three components. This classification not only serves the purpose of easing the researchers in identifying the choice of words in the proposed questions, but it also helps to determine that these components capture the tone, imagery, and theme of the piece.

The selection of the following critical nouns is intended to construct emotionally and philosophically sentimental poems, where the key nouns are nightingale, death, and dream. The nightingale, being one of the symbolic key nouns in Keats's poem, reinforces themes of *beauty*, *transcendence*, *escapism*, and

even *immortality*. In contrast, death creates a rather grim tone while accentuating the sobering truth of mortality. The dream serves as a midpoint between aspiration and reality while accentuating the poet's inner conflict of imagination and the existential hurdles he constantly faces. Overall, these nouns capture and portray the core philosophical ideas and inquiries of the poem while strengthening Keats's Romantic ideals. With these verbs *fade*, *flee*, and *dissolve*, there is an emphasis on movement, transformation, and impermanence. The word *fade* represents the gradual disappearance of strength which enhances the theme of transience. *Flee* captures a need and urgency, implying the escape from worldly suffering, making it align with the Keats' endeavors. The word *dissolve* further reinforces the merging imagery and the flow of time, rather than strength. Together, these verbs highlight the conflict between permanence and decay, emphasizing life's transitory nature.

Adverbs and other phrases, such as *softly*, *half*, and *in the forest*, contribute to the depth of the poem's atmosphere. *Softly* reflects a soft and gentle perspective, which aids in the contouring of sensory experience, enhancing the Romantic ideal of emotional restraint. *Half* brings a certain degree of vagueness, which corresponds with the poet's inner struggle between wanting something and having it. *In the forest* establishes a context for the poem that is quite remote, restating the motif of nature as a hiding place for pain. The circumstantial elements provide a great deal to the immersion of the poem, bringing reflections and self-doubt.

The use of circumstantial phrases in the analysis of Keats's word choice exposes the maker's selection that contributes to making the core themes in *Ode to a Nightingale*. The examination of nouns, verbs, and adverbs/prepositional adjectives shows that Keats creates a poetic setting of *beauty*, *sorrow*, *existence*, and *longing*. The analysis of words that shift and shape the poem further affirms the poem's place within lasting literary value.

Table 3: Lexical Choices and Their Role in Conveying Mortality, Nature, and Escapism in Ode to a Nightingale

Component	Lexical Choices	Conveyance of Mortality	Conveyance of Nature	Conveyance of Escapism	Logical Meta function Connections
Participants	Nightingale	Represents a contrast to human mortality	Embodies the beauty and permanence of nature	Symbolizes the ideal of transcending reality	Coordinated with human experience and emotion.
	Death	Direct reference to the inevitable end of life	Juxtaposes life with nature's cycles	Highlights the desire to escape from death	Subordinated to the theme of existential reflection.
	Human	Reflects vulnerability and fragility	Serves as a counterpoint to the eternal nightingale	Represents the struggle between human limitations and desires	Connects to broader themes of life and death.
Processes	Fade	Suggests the slow approach to death	Implies the fading of beauty and life	Represents the longing to escape mortality	Coordinated actions that relate mortality and nature.
	Flee	Implies a desire to escape the	Suggests fleeing to nature for	Evokes the wish to transcend	Subordinates the urgency of escape in

		finality of death	solace	life's struggles	contrast to inevitability.
Dissolve		Indicates a merging into nothingness	Represents the cycle of life and decay	Conveys a sense of liberation from earthly constraints	Connects experiences of loss and rebirth.
Circumstances	Softly	Adds a delicate quality to the discussion of mortality	Enhances the sensory experience of nature	Creates a calming atmosphere for reflection	Coordinated with emotional depth in nature.
	Deep	Implies profound contemplation of existence	Evokes depth in nature's beauty	Suggests immersion in natural beauty as an escape	Subordinates' thoughts of mortality within the context of nature.
	Amidst the leaves	Grounds the experience in a natural setting	Illustrates the beauty and tranquillity of nature	Offers an escape into the natural world	Connects nature and mortality through shared experiences.

The table presents the significant lexical items in Ode to a Nightingale along with participants, processes, and circumstances, and how they interrelate to form the primary themes in the poem which are death, nature, and escapism. One of the main elements of the poem, the nightingale, symbolizes the unwavering aspect of

nature as compared to the ephemeral nature of humans. In the poem, Keats represents the nightingale as a creature that is beyond time, one that sings songs that outlive people, defying the decline of humanity. This allows him to represent his people as being non-permanent and the speaker to be profoundly wanting to escape from reality. This juxtaposition between the nightingale's 'ever living' state and humanity's fragile condition accentuates the sadness of the poem, serving to strengthen the theme of existentialism.

As an unfaltering reality awaiting everyone who lives, death plays an essential role in the poem. It's prominent when Keats positions death as opposing nature's cycles. It brings out the difference between the ephemeral reality of human life and the song of the nightingale that seems endless. The mention of death in the poem accentuates the speaker's desire for an escape, as the speaker surrenders himself to the wish of basking in the bird's song. For Keats, death is not only an end but something that propels the speaker's wish to go beyond the pain of this life. From this interplay between mortality and nature, the poem deepens its existential inquiry about the life-art eternity nexus. In the poem, humanity is depicted as fragile, caught in a conflict of restrictions and aspirations. The speaker pondering the ephemeral essence of life shows an aspect of the human condition, looking for something greater than the reality around us. The nightingale represents an ideal state with its unapproachable nature; the fragility of humans alongside it serves to portray the transient nature of joy, beauty, and existence. Placing human experience alongside the song of the nightingale, Keats ruminates on life's transience and the irony of searching for peace in an illusionary ideal.

The activities occurring in the poem: the processes 'fade,' 'flee' and 'dissolve' portray an elusion of mortality and escapism. The elude 'fade' touches upon an almost unconscious decline that is total and ever-satisfying. 'Fade' suggests decay in pleasure and beauty. The deterioration of pleasure and opulence aids in encapsulating the poem's meditation on the ephemeral. While similarly

acknowledging the erosion of *joy* and *beauty*, the speaker differentiates themselves from the impossibility of time. The notion: 'flee' suggests a form of expiration which depicts the speaker feeling unshackled, wanting to break free from the chains of living humanity. '*Dissolve*' conversely shows a blunt unyieldingness which hints at losing one's self into oblivion whilst implying the nonexistence of earth's crippling boundaries. This signals the '*flee*' as the action of wishfully putting nature above all else. These actions aid towards constructing this poem's major depiction of the speaker's reality which oscillates the fantasy of the nightingale, as well as the thrust of expectation that intertwines the instilling hope of despair.

As previously stated, the conditions '*softly*,' '*deep*,' and 'amidst the leaves' give wider scope towards understanding the underlying structure of the poem. The adverb '*softly*' brings some form of tenderness and even a dream-like aspect to the theme of death, which serves to strengthen the inner reflection of the poem. It hints at a gentler form of transition, as opposed to an abrupt jump, which supports the Romantic notion of accepting death as a form of liberation instead of annihilation. 'Deep' evokes the idea of being lost or absorbed in nature's beauty, which evokes a pure philosophical thought. This choice of wording succinctly captures the degree of the speaker's reflections and his world which is carefully intertwined, further removing the borders between reality and fantasy. '*Amidst the leaves*' is more illustrative and serves to anchor the speakers' thoughts about existence to the actual world. By placing the speaker in a definite setting, Keats emphasizes the relationships between man and nature, in the sense that the speaker's desires and thoughts are literally and figuratively intertwined with his surroundings.

The logical meta-function links relating to Keats's thematic exposition within the poem enhance its structure even more. Subordination and coordination create connections between escapism, mortality, and nature. The timeless world of

nature often stands in stark contrast to the existence of human life, which is brief and fleeting. By juxtaposing these themes, the emotional intensity of the poem rises to focus on the fight between the everlasting and the ephemeral. In contrast, escapism blooms in subordination to the extraordinary contrast of death and life. Knowing that every human has to die provides the speaker with a desire to take flight into the soothing song of the nightingale thus, positioning escapism as a response to human suffering. This logical structuring augments the exploration of language and shapes the reader's mind regarding expansive themes of existence and human life.

Considering Keats's word choices from the perspective of Ideational Meta-function, this analysis seeks to explain the meaning constructed in the poem, *A Nightingale*. The integration of participants, processes, and circumstances portrays the intense encounters the poem has with concepts such as death, nature, and escapism. The nightingale is a permanent, yet unattainable figure to the speaker who is only ephemeral. The adverbs and verbs that dominate the poem illuminate the emotional and philosophical conflict between the real world and the world of dreams. The rational links between these parts further organize and suggest fluidity to the exploration of themes Keats makes. In the end, *A Nightingale* is transformed into a meditative entry into life, death, and the human desire to rise above the limitations of being through careful word choices by Keats.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the overlapping connections between language and themes in John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* and articulated language that sets the scene for the details of death, nature and escape. The study has shown, using Halliday and Matthiessen's Ideational Meta-function framework, that nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that Keats chose for the poem were far more than decorations; they played a central role in defining the poem's tone, imagery and meaning. Words such as "*nightingale*" and "*death*" alone put signals of a fight

between everlasting and Not living things in the sentence. Verbs such as “*fade*” and “*flee*” describe the speaker’s struggle with existence, and their wish to cross over beyond. In addition, the study also shows the use of Keats's language that makes him an emblematic Romanticism delineates the border between real and imaginary. This finding is influential in stylistic analysis because it focuses on the keystones of choosing the lexicon that has decisive consequences. We can build on this method for other works of Romantic poets, thus enabling us to learn how the themes of literature works are defined. This analysis of the choice of words made by Keats enables us to celebrate overwhelmingly the importance of *Ode to a Nightingale* for its language and its phenomenal behind art sustained on a single point.

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