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Dark Night of the Soul

Dark Night of the Soul (Spanish: *La noche oscura del alma*) is a poem written by the 16th-century Spanish mystic and poet St. John of the Cross. The author himself did not give any title to his poem, on which he wrote two book-length commentaries: *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (*Subida del Monte Carmelo*) and *The Dark Night* (*Noche Oscura*).

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Poem and treatise of St. John of the Cross

The poem of St. John of the Cross, in 8 stanzas of 5 lines each, narrates the journey of the soul to mystical union with God. The journey is called "The Dark Night" in part because darkness represents the fact that the destination, God, is unknowable, as in the 14th century, mystical classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which, like St. John's poem, derives from the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the sixth century. Further, the path *per se* is unknowable. The first verse of the poem is translated:^[1]

In an obscure night
 Fevered with love's anxiety
 (O hapless, happy plight!)
 I went, none seeing me
 Forth from my house, where all things quiet be



St. John of the Cross, OCD

—that is, the body and the mind, with their natural cares, being stilled. At the beginning of the treatise *Dark Night* (the *Declaración*), St. John wrote: "In this first verse, the soul tells the mode and manner in which it departs, as to its affection, from itself and from all things, dying through a true mortification to all of them and to itself, to arrive at a sweet and delicious life with God."

The "dark night of the soul" does not refer to the difficulties of life in general,^[2] although the phrase has understandably been taken to refer to such trials. The nights which the soul experiences are the two necessary purgations on the path to Divine union: the first purgation is of the sensory or sensitive part of the soul, the second of the spiritual part (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Ch. 1, 2). Such purgations comprise the first of the three stages of the mystical journey, followed by those of illumination and then union.^[3] St. John does not actually use the term "dark night of the soul", but only "dark night" ("noche oscura").

There are several steps in this night, which are related in successive stanzas of the poem. The thesis of the poem is the joyful experience of being guided to God. The only light in this dark night is that which burns in the soul. And that is a guide more certain than the mid-day sun: *Aquésta me guiaba, más cierto que la luz del mediodía*. This light leads the soul engaged in the mystical journey to Divine union.

The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is divided into three books that reflect the two phases of the dark night. The first is a purification of the senses (It is titled "The Active Night of the Senses"). The second and third books describe the more intense purification of the spirit (Titled "The Active Night of the Spirit"). *Dark Night of the Soul* further describes the ten steps on the ladder of mystical love, previously described by Saint Thomas Aquinas and in part by Aristotle.

The time or place of composition are not certain. It is likely the poem was written between 1577 and 1579. It has been proposed that the poem was composed while John was imprisoned in Toledo, although the few explicit statements in this regard are unconvincing and second-hand.^[4]

The treatises, written sometime between 1578 and 1585, are commentaries on the poem, explaining its meaning line by line. Padre Lucinio del SS. Sacramento, who edited the critical edition (edition 5), with extremely thorough notes, of John of the Cross's *Complete Works* in the *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos* series,^[5] writes that "the idea of the 'night' to analyse the complex psychology of the soul under the purifying influence of grace is the most original and fruitful symbolic creation of the Mystic Doctor's doctrine."^[6] The *Ascent* and the *Dark Night* should be considered as forming a single body as P. Lucinio states,^[7] quoting Andrés de la Encarnación and P. Silverio de Santa Teresa. Both works were left uncompleted.

In Roman Catholic spirituality

The term "dark night (of the soul)" in Roman Catholic spirituality describes a spiritual crisis in the journey toward union with God, like that described by St. John of the Cross.

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, OCD, a 19th-century French nun and Doctor of the Church, wrote of her own experience of the dark night. Her dark night derived from doubt of the existence of eternity, to which doubt she nonetheless did not give intellectual or volitional assent, but rather prevailed by a deepening of her Catholic faith. However, she painfully suffered through this prolonged period of spiritual darkness, even declaring to her fellow nuns: "If you only knew what darkness I am plunged into..!"^[8]

While this spiritual crisis is usually temporary, it may endure for a long time. The "dark night" of St. Paul of the Cross in the 18th century endured 45 years, from which he ultimately recovered. The dark night of St. Teresa of Calcutta, whose own name in religion she selected in honor of St. Thérèse, "may be the most extensive such case on record", having endured from 1948 almost until her death in 1997, with only brief interludes of relief, according to her letters.^[9]

In popular culture

T. S. Eliot alludes to "The Dark Night of the Soul" throughout his "Four Quartets"

Ernest Dowson alludes to the "obscure night of the soul" in his absinthe poem, *Absinthia Taetra*.

The Spanish singer Rosalía arranged a version of the poem *Dark Night of the Soul* and released it as a single titled *Aunque es de noche*.^[10]

In *The Crack-Up*, F. Scott Fitzgerald penned his famous line, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning".

As a comment on the shallowness of modern spirituality, author and humorist Douglas Adams parodied the phrase with the title of his 1988 science fiction novel *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*.

English electronic band Depeche Mode make a clear reference in "I Feel Loved", the second single released from the album *Exciter*: "It's the dark night of my soul and temptation's taking hold, but through the pain and the suffering, through the heartache and trembling I feel loved...".

Alternative rock band Sparklehorse, along with producer Danger Mouse and director and visual artist David Lynch, collaborated with a number of other artists on an audio-visual project titled *Danger Mouse and Sparklehorse Present: Dark Night of the Soul*.

The phrase has also been used as a song title by several other bands and music artists, including Steve Bell, The Get Up Kids, Ulver, Mayhem, and Shai Linne in *The Solus Christus Project*.

Canadian singer Loreena McKennitt set the poem to music on her album *The Mask and Mirror*.

Composer Ola Gjeilo has written a SATB choral setting accompanied with piano and string quartet, fourteen minutes long, with the English translation of the poem.^[11]

Northern Irish singer-songwriter Van Morrison writes about the "dark night of the soul" in a number of his songs, including "Tore Down a la Rimbaud" on *A Sense of Wonder* and "Give Me My Rapture" on *Poetic Champions Compose*. It also served as the inspiration for the title of the lead release of his 2019 album "Three Chords & the Truth."^[12]

In his novel, *Insomnia*, Stephen King makes a reference to the F. Scott Fitzgerald usage when his protagonist first begins experiencing the signs of insomnia following the death of his [the character's] wife. King also references it in his short story "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption".

In modern mindfulness practice, many authors have named a similar phenomenon in meditation as the dark night of the soul after the poem. It is often described as a lengthened and intense state of depression or ennui caused by errant or irresponsible meditation practices. Author John Yates compares it to a Theravadan term, *dukkha ñanas*, or "knowledge of suffering".

See also

- Ego death
- Existential crisis
- Loevinger
 - Loevinger's stages of ego development
- Dabrowski
 - Theory of positive disintegration
- Kenosis
- Lawrence Kohlberg
 - Kohlberg's stages of moral development
- Nigredo
- Psychology of religion
- Divinization (Christian)

References

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2. <https://www.michaelmirdad.com/dark-night-of-the-soul/>
3. Underhill, *Mysticism*, Ch. 4.
4. Lucinio del SS. Sacramento, Nota Introductoria a la 'Subida' y la 'Noche' in *Vida y Obras completas de San Juan de la Cruz*, 5th ed., Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1954, p. 358.
5. *Vida y Obras de San Juan de la Cruz*, 5th ed. Lucinio del Ss. Sacramento, Ed. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1964.
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8. Martin, James (29 August 2007). "A Saint's Dark Night" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/29/opinion/29martin.html?em&ex=1188532800&en=9e59f11fbd412882&ei=5087>). The New York Times.
9. David van Biema (23 August 2007). "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith" (<https://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>). Time Magazine. Retrieved 7 April 2020.
10. [1] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6s-MQzPZ6IE>)
11. "Dark Night of the Soul - Ola Gjeilo" (<http://olagjeilo.com/sheet-music/choral-satb-accompanied/dark-night-of-the-soul-satb-piano-string-quartet/>). *olagjeilo.com*.
12. "Van Morrison announces new album Three Chords and the Truth, shares "Dark Night of the Soul": Stream" (<https://consequenceofsound.net/2019/09/van-morrison-three-chords-the-truth-dark-night-of-the-soul/>). *Consequence of Sound*. 2019-09-18. Retrieved 2020-01-24.
 - The chapter titled "The Dark Night of the Soul" from Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (http://www.gnostic.org/underhill/mysticism_part_2_09_night.html) at Gnostic.org.
 - Underhill, Evelyn. (re-issue 1999). *Mysticism* Oneworld Publications. ISBN 1-85168-196-5.

Further reading

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- McKee, Kaye P. (2006). *When God Walks Away. A Companion to the Dark Night of the Soul* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=ZVLEAAAACAAJ>). New York City: Crossroad Publishing Company. ISBN 0-824-52380-6; ISBN 978-08-2452-380-0.

External links

- *Dark Night of the Soul* (<http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2009/09/saint-john-of-cross-dark-night-of-soul.html>) verse translation of the poem.
- Text of *Dark Night of the Soul* (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john_cross/dark_night.txt) from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library
- Original and Translation of *Dark Night of the Soul* (<http://josvg.home.xs4all.nl/cits/lm/stjohn01.html>) From *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*
- This article incorporates text from a publication now in the public domain: Herbermann, Charles, ed. (1913). "St. John of the Cross". *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company.
- Online version of *Dark Night of the Soul* (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john_cross/dark_night.toc.html)

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