

**Ain Shams University**  
**Faculty of Education**  
**Department of English**

**A Ph.D. Thesis Entitled**  
**The Evolution of the English Ode from Spenser to**  
**Keats : A Thematic and a Textual Approach**

**Submitted by**  
**Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein Mahmoud**

**Under the Supervision of**  
**Late Prof. Dr. Adel Mohamed Salama**  
Professor of English Literature  
Faculty of Education  
Ain Shams University

**Prof. Dr. Mona Abou-Senna**  
Professor of English Literature  
Faculty of Education  
Ain Shams University

**Prof. Dr. Nadia Abou El-Magd**  
Professor of English Literature  
Faculty of Education  
Ain Shams University

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# **Table of Contents**

	<b>Page</b>
Acknowledgements	
Introduction .....	1
<b><u>Chapter One :</u></b>	
Victory over Short Time: A Revaluation of Edmund Spenser's "Epithalamion" .....	29
<b><u>Chapter Two :</u></b>	
Poetry as Public Art: Three Seventeenth- Century Odes.....	69
<b><u>Chapter Three :</u></b>	
The Burden of the Poetic Past in Two Odes of Gray and Collins .....	131
<b><u>Chapter Four :</u></b>	
Self-Centered Disquiet in the Romantic Ode.....	179
<b><u>Chapter Five :</u></b>	
The Quest for Transcendence in the Odes of Keats.....	225
Conclusion.....	269
Bibliography.....	274
Summary	
Arabic Summary	

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**Dept. of English – Faculty of Education –**  
**Ain Shams University**

**Abstract**

An ode is a lyric poem of some length dealing with a lofty theme in a dignified manner and originally intended to be sung. The ode is classical in origin. The major classical models for the English ode are Pindar in Greek literature and Horace in Latin literature. The three periods of English literary history during which the ode enjoyed ascendancy among lyric types are: the Miltonic, the Neoclassical and the Romantic. The popularity of the ode form waned during the Victorian period.

This thesis traces the evolution of the English ode during the period from the Elizabethan age to the Romantic era. The approach of the thesis is both thematic and textual: the thesis examines the major English odes which were written during the period specified in order to reveal the thematic features that characterize the ode genre and the development of these features from one period to another. The English ode was firmly established as a distinct poetic type in the seventeenth century. However, the reason for choosing Edmund Spenser's "Epithalamion" (1595) as a starting point for this thesis is that this poem displays the characteristic features of the ode genre, despite the fact that it was not given the title ode by its author.

The thesis is divided into five chapters with an introduction, which defines the ode genre and sheds some light on its classical

## I

The ode is a form of lyric poetry which is classical in origin. “Ode” is a Greek word meaning “song,” brought into modern speech through its Latin form “oda”. In their article on the ode in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993), Stephen F. Fogle and Paul H. Fry state that “ode” is derived from the Greek “aeidein” which means “to sing” or “to chant” (eds. Preminger and Brogan, p. 855). The Greek root word was used for all varieties of Greek lyric. In his book *An Introduction to the Study of Literature* (1979), William Hudson explains that among the Greeks “ode” was used, generally, for any kind of lyrical composition, from the drinking songs of Anacreon to the love songs of Sappho, and from these again to the lofty occasional poems of Pindar (p. 99, n3).

Therefore, the Greek ode was practically synonymous with modern English lyric. But in the modern English usage the term has acquired a much narrower meaning. “Ode”, Fogle and Fry assert, is now restricted to “the most formal, ceremonious, and complexly organized form of lyric poetry” (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 855). In modern usage the term “ode” is used to designate weighty, reflective and philosophical lyric poems which are of considerable length and which are elaborate in form and dignified in content. The ode is the most exalted of the lyric forms of poetry. Poets who claim the definition and title of ‘ode’ for a work have generally respected this categorization. Examples are: Gray’s “The Progress of Poesy: A Pindaric Ode,” Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” and Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

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Attempting to give one single sense to the term “ode” is not an easy task. The diversity among those English poems which have been called odes by their writers is bewildering. This diversity has made difficult the formulation of criteria for the typical English ode.

Different forms of poetry such as elegy, sonnet and satire are discriminated either by subject matter or by form or by the view-point taken in writing them. Unlike these verse forms, the ode is not specifically differentiated from other types of lyric by any one constant feature or combination of features. In his book *The English Ode to 1660: An Essay in Literary History* (1966), Robert Shafer draws attention to this generic problem when he says that the ode is different from other poetic types in that subject matter, view-point, and form are in it susceptible to great variation (p.1). In the introduction to his book *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (1980), Paul H. Fry confronts this problem of definition. He argues that the term “ode” has a checkered history, in part because it is derived from a Greek word for “song” and differs little in root meaning, therefore, from “sonnet,” “hymn,” “canzone,” and countless other terms. Appealing to usage, Fry continues, does not clarify matters as much as one could wish because poets have often seemed to use the word so indiscriminately that most readers pay no attention to its presence in a title. Historians of the ode, Fry adds, are more embarrassed about the problem of canonical selection than, for instance, historians of the elegy, because the widely differing sorts of lyric that are entitled odes cannot be said to be subspecies of a master type (p.4).

The definitions offered by earlier writers on the ode reflect this problem of generic classification. In the introduction to *English Odes* (1884), Edmund Gosse defined the ode genre saying:

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“we take as an ode any strain of enthusiastic and exalted lyrical verse, directed to a fixed purpose, and dealing progressively with one dignified theme” (qtd. in Shafer, p.2). In the “Introductory Note” to his selection *Great Odes: English and American*, William Sharp suggests “that any poem finely wrought, and full of high thinking, which is of the nature of an apostrophe, or of sustained intellectual meditation on a single theme of general purport, should be classed as an ode” (qtd. in Shafer, p.2).

In spite of the fact that English poets have on occasion used the term “ode” very loosely, the major English poems which are entitled odes share certain features which distinguish the ode tradition from other poetic types. Robert Shafer argues that the masters of English poetry who wrote the finest and the best-known examples of the genre have united to give the ode “a consistency of spirit and a common residuum of inner qualities” which fairly entitle it to consideration as a distinct kind in English lyric poetry (p.3).

The definitions offered by odic theorists reveal these “inner qualities” of the ode genre. Shafer requires “that a true ode be a lyrical poem, serious in tone and stately in its structure; that it be cast in the form of an address; that it be rapid in style, treating its subject with ‘brevity and variety’; and that its unity be emotional in character” (p.3). George N. Shuster, in his *The English Ode from Milton to Keats* (1940), declares that the “element of address is of no especial significance, being merely a reflection of the classical influence” (qtd. in Jump, *The Ode* (1974), p.3).

Dignity and exaltation of manner and matter are the major features that characterize the ode genre. The ode is not restricted to a limited range of subject matter; any non-narrative poem of a

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grave kind on a theme of acknowledged importance can be termed ode. According to *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (1973), the ode is the “most elevated and complicated species of lyric” which “was often written to celebrate notable public occasions or lofty universal themes” (Ed. Roger Fowler, p. 131). J.A. Cuddon’s *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1991) defines the ode as

a lyric poem, usually of some length. The main features are an elaborate stanza – structure, a marked formality and stateliness in tone and style (which make it ceremonious), and lofty sentiments and thoughts. In short, an ode is rather a grand poem; a full-dress poem. (p.650)

In his book *The Classical Tradition* (1949), Gilbert Highet sees the material of the ode as a product of the interplay of emotions and reflection. He observes that the emotion of the ode is stirred and sustained by one or more of the nobler and less transient events of human life, particularly those in which temporary and physical facts are transfigured by the spiritual and eternal. Highet defines the ode saying :

In modern literature an ode is a poem combining personal emotion with deep meditation on a subject of wide scope or broad public interest. It is short enough to express one emotion in a single movement, but long enough to develop a number of different aspects of that emotion. It is either addressed to one person (human or superhuman) or evoked by one occasion of particular significance. Its moving force is emotion more than intellect; but the emotional excitement is tempered, and its expression arranged, by intellectual reflection. (p.239)

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According to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1991), we can distinguish two basic kinds of ode: the public and the private. The public is used for ceremonial occasions, like funerals, birthdays, state events; the private often celebrates rather intense, personal, and subjective occasions; it is inclined to be meditative, reflective (ed. Cuddon, p.650). Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" is an example of the former; Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" an example of the latter. However, the odes which are inspired by private occasions of crisis or joy never remain merely personal. In these odes the poets use the private occasion to dwell on subjects which concern humanity at large. The present thesis will show that this thematic feature becomes clear in the odes of the Romantic period. In *The Ode* (1974), John D. Jump declares that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the word "ode" has been used to refer to

lyrical poems which, originating in personal impulses, rise to the presentation of general ideas of some gravity and substance. Most of these poems are of moderate length and are fairly elaborate in structure and in style. Many of them take the form of addresses, though this is now less common than it was when the classical influence was more potent. Poems which possess some but not all of these attributes may still be acceptably termed odes.(p.59)

In structure, the ode may be regular, like Collins's "Ode to Evening," Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," or irregular, like Dryden's "Alexander's Feast," and Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."

## II

This thesis attempts to trace the evolution of the English ode during the period from the Elizabethan age to the Romantic era.

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The Elizabethan age witnessed the English beginnings of the ode. The great period of the English ode began with Milton's contemporary, Abraham Cowley. The ode genre attained great popularity in England when Cowley published his *Pindarique Odes* in 1656. The three periods of literary history in England during which the ode enjoyed ascendancy among lyric types are: the Cowleyan, the Neoclassical and the Romantic. One reason why the ode remained popular in England for so long is that this poetic form derived from Greek and Latin practice, and for centuries the classics held sway in English education as the source of all creative writing in verse (Reeves, *Understanding Poetry* (1965), p.78).

Many of the finest English odes appeared during the early years of the nineteenth century and imparted an impulse that persisted throughout the Victorian age. But during the Victorian age authors began to use the title "ode" less readily, until in the twentieth century it was widely abandoned as an embarrassment. In his book, *Understanding Poetry* (1965), James Reeves states that after the middle of the nineteenth century, though occasional odes continued to be written, the form was definitely regarded as old-fashioned, and any poet who composed one was cultivating something of the atmosphere of a museum (p.78). Fogle and Fry assert this fact about the history of the English ode saying that since the Romantic period, with the exception of a few brilliant but isolated examples such as Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," the ode has been neither a popular nor a really successful genre in English literature (in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia*, p.857). This explains why this thesis ends with a study of the major English odes written in the Romantic period.

The masters of English poetry who have carried the ode to its highest achievements are Milton, Dryden, Collins, Gray, Coleridge,

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Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley (*The Encyclopedia Americana: International Edition* (1994), vol. 20, p.632). Those poets wrote the finest and best-known odes of English poetry. However, to this list should be added the names of two English poets who wrote poems that, as this thesis will show, deserve to occupy a prominent place in the history of the English ode. Those two poets are Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson. Despite the fact that Spenser's "Epithalamion" (1595) is not given the title "ode", the thesis will show that this poem reflects and embodies the salient features of the fully blown ode. Furthermore, the influence of the classical models of the ode genre is very clear in this poem. That is why Spenser's "Epithalamion" is chosen as the starting point for this thesis. Chapter one is devoted to an evaluative analysis of this poem. As regards Ben Jonson, he wrote the first English imitation of the classical form of the ode; namely, "Ode to Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison" (1629). This explains why *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* says that the "English ode begins with Ben Jonson" (ed. Fowler, p. 132). Jonson's ode is examined in chapter two of the thesis which also deals with Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629), and Dryden's "Alexander's Feast; or the Power of Musique" (1697). Milton's "Nativity Ode" is informed with a spirit of emotional elevation and high seriousness which entitles it to a place among the great odes of English literature. Dryden's "Alexander's Feast" was written to celebrate the power of the arts of music and poetry. In the century that followed the composition of this poem the ode was regarded as a suitable vehicle for the expression of dignified themes.

Because of its elaborate rules, formality and decorum, the ode form attracted the English poets of the eighteenth century. Thomas Gray and William Collins wrote the great odes of the Neoclassical period. Chapter three deals with both Gray's "The Progress of

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Poesy,” and Collins’s “Ode on the Poetical Character.” The progress of poetry and the nature of poetic creation are the central themes of these two odes.

The Romantics perfected a special form of ode: the personal ode of description and passionate meditation. Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” and Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” which are dealt with in chapter four, display the major characteristics of the Romantic ode. Keats wrote six superb odes in which he tackled themes of universally human significance. Because the odes of Keats represent the high point of the ode tradition, a separate chapter (the fifth) is devoted to an analysis of three odes of Keats – “Ode to Psyche,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

The primary objective of this thesis is to study the interaction between the ode tradition and the above – mentioned poets. The thesis attempts to show how the major English poets adapted this generic form to fit their particular concerns and to express the concerns of their age. The approach of the thesis is thematic and textual: it reveals and analyzes the major thematic features of the ode genre during the period specified and the development of these features from one period to another. Aspects related to form are also taken into consideration. Those formal features which are of particular significance in the history and development of the ode are considered and examined. Since this thesis is not an exhaustive account of all the English odes written in the periods specified, only those examples of the genre which embody and represent the major formal as well as thematic features of the ode and their evolution during the periods under study are dealt with and studied in a chronological order.

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In the introduction to *Classical Genres and English Poetry* (1988), William H. Race says: “changes in generic form are also indicative of larger historical changes” (p.xv). Therefore, generic evolution can scarcely be understood in isolation; works which employ or even transform a genre should be placed and studied within the literary and historical conditions which produced them. In the case of the ode, some of the significant changes in the thematic features of the genre that took place during the period under study can be attributed to certain literary, historical and biographical circumstances. Accordingly, though attention is focused on the texts of the poems under study, some of these above-mentioned circumstances are taken into account.

The English ode has been in its origins very largely influenced by the examples of two classical poets: the Greek poet Pindar and the Roman poet Horace. In *The Poetry Dictionary* (1995), the ode is defined as a poem in any of several song-like forms: the Pindaric ode which is an imitation of the form of the odes of Pindar, the Horatian ode which is modelled on the form of the odes of Horace, and the Cowleyan or irregular ode which is named after Abraham Cowley (Drury, p. 182). To analyze and evaluate the odes subject for study, the candidate believes that it is essential to shed some light on the classical models of the ode genre and the earliest English imitations of these models.

### III

The chief classical models for the English ode are Pindar (522-442 BC) in Greek literature and Horace (65-8 BC) in Latin literature. Fogle and Fry begin their article on the “ode” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia* with an account of the classical prototypes of this poetic form. The ode, they state, as it has evolved

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in contemporary literatures generally shows a dual inheritance from classical sources, variously combining the measured, recurrent stanza of the Horatian ode, with its attendant balance of tone and sentiment, and the regular or irregular stanzaic triad of Pindar, with its elevated, vertiginously changeable tone (p.855). Jump places emphasis on the classical origins of the ode saying that many English odes belong to a tradition stemming from the work of the classical Greek poet, Pindar, and many others belong to a tradition stemming from that of the classical Latin poet, Horace (p.3). Pindar and Horace were the begetters of the ode genre and they influenced its development in Renaissance Europe. However, Fogle and Fry add three other classical sources of the modern ode: the Greek cult-hymn, the Psalms and other poems of the Hebrew Bible and the lyrics of the Greek poet Anacreon. The cult-hymn is notable for its structure of argument: an invocation of a deity (later of a personified natural or psychological entity), followed by a narrative genealogy establishing the antiquity and authenticity of the deity, followed by a petition for some special favor, and concluding with a vow of future service. The cult-hymns and poems of the Hebrew Bible are the source of the modern ode's structure of prayerful petition. The third form of the modern ode, the Anacreontic, is descended from poems credited to Anacreon. In comparison with the Pindaric ode, Anacreontic lyrics were written in simple forms, and they dealt with subjects like love or drinking (*The Princeton Encyclopedia*, p.856).

A complete modern instance of the structure of the Greek cult-hymn is Keats's "Ode to Psyche." As regards Anacreon, he was much less admired by modern lyricists than Pindar and Horace (Highet, p.228). Anacreon's influence appears in simple lyrics, which are songs written for the moment, rather than in odes, which are songs in the classical manner written for eternity. Jump is

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justified in holding that Pindar and Horace remain the two dominant figures in the history of the ode. Anacreon's influence, Jump argues, has been considerable, but it appears in songs and short lyrics rather than in odes; and, while King David the Psalmist has provided a pervasive inspiration throughout much of English literature, he has not influenced the actual form of the English odes (p.3).

Since Pindar and Horace are the primary sources of the modern ode, it is essential to give an account of the history and major features of the traditions descending from the two poets.

### **The Pindaric Tradition:**

Greek lyric poetry was composed to be sung to the accompaniment of music. In the introduction to *Pindar : Victory Odes* (1995), M.M. Willcock writes that Greek lyrics are commonly divided into two types: personal lyric of the kind composed by Sappho, Alcaeus, and Anacreon; and choral lyric which was associated with the names of Alcman, Stesichorus, Simonides, and, greatest of all, Pindar (p.1). The Greek personal lyrics, or monodies, were sung by single persons, but the choral songs or odes were performed by choirs. The choral ode or song is of special significance in the history of the ode genre. The Greek choral odes, Jump illustrates, had originated in religious celebrations and were performed at festivals and on other important occasions, human or divine. They normally included four elements: prayers or praise to the gods, stories or myths from the heroic past, moral maxims, and personal references appropriate to the circumstances of the performance. Their tone was grave and dignified (p.4).

The classical choral lyrics developed differently in the hands of different poets. But most of the works of those classical poets

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