

Imagery in the Poems of John Keats and Siegfried Sassoon: The Study of Imagery Types

Umer Rehman¹ and Taj Ullah²

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2025.14.3.133>

Abstract

This study conducts a comparative analysis of sensory imagery employed in John Keats's "ode to psyche" and "ode on melancholy," alongside Siegfried Sassoon's "attack" and "base details," using an integrated framework combining new critical and cognitive trauma theory approaches. The findings reveal that Keats constructs a cohesive sensory ecosystem through a paradoxical structure, creating a unified, beautiful world. Moreover, his use of sensory paradox in the odes resolves the tension between beauty and pain, reflecting a special kind of magic known as aesthetic alchemy that helps readers see things in a new way. In stark contrast, Sassoon employs irony in his war poems to create a broken and disturbing world and to expose psychological trauma and social critique, leaving readers with a sense of discomfort and chaos. The interplay of paradox, irony and a carefully orchestrated imagery demonstrates the essential shift in poetic function from romantic aspirations of transcendence to modernist demands for testimony. The findings indicate that Keats's integrative imagery creates a unified, emotional connection with readers, particularly resolving the central paradox of "ode to psyche" through imaginative temple-building. On the other hand, Siegfried Sassoon uses disintegrative imagery in "attack" to paint a picture of chaos and trauma, mirroring the disintegration of the structural coherence. This study merges the traditional analysis with cognitive and trauma theories, offering a new framework for understanding how sensory language shapes poetry's impact across literary periods.

Keywords: Imagery, Sensuousness, Tactile, Gustatory, Olfactory, Auditory, Kinaesthetic.

Introduction

The shift in sensibility of English poetry from romanticism to modernism is easily observed, with the evolution from being very imaginative and beautiful to being harsh and straightforward. Both John Keats and Siegfried Sassoon were highly skilled at painting pictures with words, but they said opposite and different things using this art. Keats's sensuousness can be reflected in his poems, which seek inner escape from the world, while Sassoon's poems deal with the outward reality of life.

Keats's "ode to psyche" serves as a sacred garden where every flower whispers and every leaf breathes, and senses serve as the gateway to eternal beauty. On the other hand, Sassoon's "attack" turns that garden into a battlefield where the air smells of gunpowder and the only music is the scream of artillery. This drastic change completely transforms what poetry means and what it can do. Keats creates temples of beauty, while Sassoon destroys them through his imagery.

¹Department of English, NUML University Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: jhondon708@gmail.com

²Department of English linguistics, Hazara University Mansehra, KPK, Pakistan.



The sensory beauty overflows in Keats's poetry, where winks bubble and autumn glows in golden light, forming an ecology of beauty where each sense supports the others. The senses, on the other side, clash and destroy each other in Sassoon's poetry, where the horrific sights of a grey, muttering face and a deafening roar of guns exploit the castle of beauty. In addition, Keats tries to lift his readers above the pain with beauty, while Sassoon believes that art must face the pain honestly.

The paper offers a critical analysis of the selected poems through the lens of new criticism, revealing the dialectical interplay between two distinct poetic ideologies. Keats, in "ode on melancholy" and "ode to psyche", uses the heavens of imagination against worldly sufferings. Sassoon, on the other hand, uses intense, realistic images in his poems "base detail" and "attack" to show the horror of war, and his descriptions destroy the false beauty and expose the reality.

By applying the principle of new criticism, this research undertakes a close textual analysis of the selected poems, and this approach facilitates a meticulous study of how sensory imagery contributes to the depth of the poems, setting aside the historical and biographical context and focusing on how the poems themselves create meanings.

Statement of the Problem

Both John Keats and Siegfried Sassoon are separated by nearly a century and shaped by different literary and historical movements, such as romantic idealism and modernist negation. They both have made sensory imagery a cornerstone of their poetic expression. While many scholars have explored each poet and understood their technical brilliance in employing imagery, there remains a notable gap in comparative studies that examines how different types of imagery operate as a fundamental system of meaning across two eras. Existing scholarship tends to study both Keats and Sassoon in isolation. In contrast, this study conducts a comparative analysis grounded in new criticism, combining a close reading technique with insights from cognitive and trauma theory, which are substantial for understanding how imagery enriches meaning.

This study examines how paradox in Keats's selected poems and irony in Sassoon's poems organise their sensory imagery. By addressing this gap, this study aims to provide a profound understanding of how imagery shapes the meaning of poetry, highlighting the distinct features of Keats's and Sassoon's poetic formulations.

Research Questions

- How does John Keats use paradoxical imagery in "ode on melancholy" and "ode to psyche" to attain aesthetic unity and spiritual depth?
- How does Siegfried Sassoon employ ironic imagery in "base detail" and "attack" to create dissonance and facilitate socio-psychological analysis?

Research Objectives

- To figure out and categorise the specific types of imagery (visual, gustatory, olfactory, auditory, kinaesthetic) employed in Keats's "ode to psyche" and "ode on melancholy" and Sassoon's "attack" and "base detail".
- To analyse how the principles of paradox create meanings for sensory imagery in Keats's selected odes, highlighting its role in promoting unity and spiritual elevations.
- To examine how the principles of irony structure imagery in war poems by Sassoon, focusing on its role in creating dissonance and satire.

Significance of the Study

This study has a significant implication for literary scholars, introducing a new comparative framework that challenges traditional boundaries. By exploring the paradoxical principles employed by Keats and the ironic devices used by Sassoon, this research reveals the mechanisms by which these devices structure sensory imagery in their poetry. Moreover, this study provides a pedagogical tool for poetry analysis, enabling students and researchers to analyse meanings systematically.

Literature Review

Recent studies have advanced the understanding of John Keats's odes and Sassoon's war poetry by incorporating new theoretical perspectives and holistic methodologies.

Sharma's (2014) analysis of affective imagery in Keats's odes argues that his use of sensuousness creates emotional appeal and embodied responses in readers. This analysis reveals how Keats blends paradox and sensory complexity to achieve a powerful effect of imagery, particularly in "ode to melancholy," where the interplay between joy and pain becomes tangibly perceptible through the verse's sensory richness. This cognitive approach provides a substantial framework for understanding how Keats's imagery has a profound emotional impact on readers.

Contemporary studies of Sassoon's poetry have focused on his innovative approach to presenting trauma. McCormack's (2018) research highlights Sassoon's use of sensory language, revealing how his war poetry employs conflicting sensory imagery to repeat the psychological experience of chaotic situations. Her analysis shows how Sassoon's poem "attack" creates an immersive experience for readers, in which auditory, tactile, and visual imagery intersect to produce psychological turmoil. This fresh perspective enriches the understanding of imagery as a tool for psychological representation, beyond mere realism.

In *Keats and Embarrassment* (1984), Christopher Ricks focuses on the tactile imagery employed by Keats, in which he turns emotions into physical sensations to let his readers experience them directly. Rick's (1984) description highlights the sensory language used by Keats, such as 'beaded bubble' and 'embalmed darkness,' which create powerful aesthetic effects. He also figures out how Keats's sensuousness to physical experience reflects his treatment of beauty and suffering simultaneously, which is inseparable. For Ricks, Keats's tactile imagery creates a direct connection with his readers, making abstract ideas more human and accessible by transforming delicate sensations into lasting truths about the human condition through the force of emotion.

The theoretical principles of new criticism have been re-examined in recent studies, where Alghadeer (2014) in rethinking close reading makes a cogent case for new criticism synthesis, combining cognitive approaches with the traditional close reading method. They propose that the formal pattern given by new critics mirrors basic cognitive structures in human recognition. This integrated approach provides a more sophisticated analysis of how Keats and Sassoon's imagery generates pragmatic meaning through affective-cognitive harmony.

Campbell's (2007) provides a detailed analysis of Sassoon's craftsmanship, specifically the use of irony, satire and imagery. He suggests that Sassoon's imagery reflects the tension between the idealised world and the world of crude reality. His images function as a psychological mirror representing trauma, and his use of sharp and vivid photos creates emotional and moral intensity which are beyond the apparent narrative. This insight strengthens the current study, which shows that Sassoon engages his readers sagaciously, confronting them with moral truth.

Recent comparative studies of the romantics and modernists have yielded innovative perspectives on both movements. Sandy's (2019) monograph, echoes of romanticism on modernist war poetry,

addresses the use of imagery by Sassoon to present a traumatised romantic sensibility despite the radical departure from romanticism. Her analysis reveals that modern poets are not negating romantics completely, as some romantic tools have been employed to reshape poetry.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is grounded in the core principles of new criticism to analyse poetry through in-depth research. The methodology focuses on a meticulous, line-by-line examination of the poetic text. Therefore, new criticism is the ideal lens for comparing Keats's and Sassoon's poetry, given its principles of textual autonomy, organic unity, and irony. First, the textual autonomy of the texts by both poets allows treating each poem as self-sufficient, enabling direct comparison without focusing on biographical and historical elements. Second, the emphasis of new criticism on paradox and irony is not just an addition; it is a necessity for examining the imagery types in selected poems deeply. Finally, the concept of organic unity demands that we discuss how each image functions, revealing how sensory details contribute to the poetic system.

The methodology involves the close reading of the selected poems through a systematic analysis. This analysis involves:

1. Identification of different types of imagery such as gustatory, tactile, olfactory, auditory and visual.
2. The structural analysis of the images shows how they have been organised and how they give meanings through the principle of paradox (in Keats's poems) and irony (in Sassoon's poems).
3. Interpretation of the poems by analysing images to understand how these images contribute to the overall meaning of the poems.

This method ensures a rigorous textual analysis of how imagery, when combined with paradox and irony, becomes the primary engine for understanding the overall meaning.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study brings together three primary theoretical approaches to form a unified model for interpreting sensory imagery in selected poems. Its foundation lies in new critical theory, which provides substantial tools for close textual analysis, as well as the key concepts of organic unity, paradox, and irony, which are essential for examining poetic structure. Extending this foundation, the cognitive literary theory enhances understanding of how imagery shapes the reader's experience. Drawing from Sharma's (2014) work on affective imagery and Sandy's (2019) work on neuro-aesthetics, this dimension of the framework explores how poetic structures evoke embodied responses and engage multiple neural pathways in processing sensory stimuli.

The third component, informed by Trauma theory, was grounded in McCormack's (2018) notion of dissonance and Vaara's (2021) work on sensory imagery, offering a significant insight for analysing Sassoon's war poems. These approaches acknowledge that sensory imagery can function simultaneously as a representation of trauma and as a psychological mechanism for responding. These perspectives converge in "architectural analysis", an approach that explores how sensory imagery constructs a poetic world through underlying principles. Together, this integrated framework provides a comprehensive exploration of the selected poems, encompassing their formal design as well as their historical, psychological and cognitive contexts.

Analysis and Findings: The structural Typology of Imagery

This section provides a detailed, systematic categorisation of sensory imagery in four representative poems, revealing how Sassoon and Keats employ it to shape their poetic worlds.

Keats: Integrated imagery of Spiritual Growth

Ode to Psyche

A peaceful refuge has been created in Nersessian's (2021) reading of Keats's "ode to psyche" by blending different images, moving from the external natural world to the internal world of the mind.

Visual Imagery

The visual employed in the poem is as follows:

"Two fair creatures, couched side by side"

The above line presents a vivid, serene image of peaceful love.

"Their starry wings" connect the lover to the stars, evoking a sense of divinity and endless space.

"Blue, silver, white and budded Tyrian"- describes the vibrant colours which depict the beautiful nature, shining like a gem.

Tactile imagery

The image "cool-rooted flowers" conveys a sense of cool, rooty freshness.

The image "soft-conched" suggests feelings of softness and gentle enclosure.

"Their arms embraced"- expresses the tenderness of physical touch.

Auditory Imagery

The poem is filled with calm and serenity as phrases like "hushed cool rooted flowers" and the whispering of heaven describe the absence of sound, creating a peaceful atmosphere.

Gustatory Imagery

The taste is not directly mentioned, but it is suggested through the sensory blending. For instance, the richness of "soft-conched ear" and "the budded Tyrian" suggests sweetness and ripeness, as if the air could taste them.

Kinaesthetic Imagery

"Wreathed trellis of a working brain" provides a complex image by combining kinaesthetic imagery with a visual-tactile structure in which the brain struggles to build an inner temple.

Olfactory Imagery

The fragrance is not directly present in the poem, but it can be inferred from imagery of flowers, such as "the cool-rooted flowers, the fragrant-eyed." This olfactory image combines visual and tactile imagery.

Ode On Melancholy

Keats transforms his sorrow into philosophical experience, illustrating that pain and beauty are inseparable. The imagery of this poem is deeply sensuous, combining the five senses to emotional perception.

Visual imagery

The pale forehead conveys the sorrow, whereas the ruby grapes of Proserpine reflect beauty and danger.

The images, like weeping clouds and droop-headed flowers, depict sadness in nature.

Moreover, the dark symbol, like "beetle, death-moth", represents death.

Auditory Imagery

The implied sound of "biding adieu" creates a melancholy mood.

Tactile imagery

The image "forehead to be kissed" conveys the warmth of touch, and phrases like "soft hand" and "droop-headed flowers" evoke a sense of softness.

Gustatory Imagery

The phrase "poisonous wine" symbolises the bitter taste of death, while "the joy's grape" represents the intense pleasure.

Olfactory imagery

"The morning rose" conveys a delicate fragrance, while "yew berries" evokes a strong, funereal fragrance.

Kinaesthetic Imagery

Images like "Go not to Lethe" and "droop-headed flowers" signify feelings of despair, whereas the "weeping cloud, bees-mouth sip" represents motion within nature.

Sassoon: The fragmented imagery of suffering

Base Details

Sassoon employs stark, grotesque imagery in base details to create an ironic caricature of military leadership, relying on sharp contrast between the officers' comfort and soldiers' suffering.

Visual Imagery

The phrase "scarlet Major" symbolises bloodshed and rank, emphasising the officer's detachment from the reality of the war.

The image of "puffy petulant faces" conveys a repulsive visual, which implies the Major's ill temper, stripping them of authority and dignity.

The phrase "stone dead" has been employed for the death of soldiers, contrasting the comfort zone and safe existence for Majors.

Auditory Imagery

The onomatopoeic phrase "guzzling and gulping" highlights the Majors' rude behaviour and lack of refinement and dignity.

The clause "He is a young, cheery old card" is spoken by the Major and conveys a glib, callous tone.

Tactile imagery

The image of "puffy faces" conveys tenderness and comfort that can be felt through touch.

The phrase "dying in bed" implies a safe and comfortable death.

Gustatory imagery

"Guzzling and gulping" reflect the consumption of food and imply the sense of taste.

Therefore, no prominent example of olfactory imagery has been found in the poem "base detail".

Attack

The poem "attack" paints a hellish picture of war through the cacophony of dissonant sensory Images, keeping readers in a state of chaos.

Visual Imagery

The image "the ridge emerges massed and dun" depicts a bleak landscape, creating a desolate tone. The phrase "lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear" turns soldiers into a terrified mass. Moreover, the line "menacing, scared slope" portrays nature as a threat.

Auditory Imagery

The phrase "barrage roars and lifts" highlights the monstrous sounds, evoking the deafening noise of artillery fire.

"The spouting shell" produces a violent, explosive sound, adding auditory chaos.

Kinaesthetic Imagery

The image "creep and topple forward" conveys the tanks' clumsy movement.

The image of "floundering in mud" shows the soldiers' struggles in the mud, emphasising war's futility.

Tactile imagery

The phrase "floundering in mud" reflects the tactile imagery where soldiers are struggling against heavy mud, a central obstacle.

Olfactory imagery

This type of imagery is not explicitly stated in the poem. Still, its setting implies a thick, powerful smell (smouldering) of explosive material, mud, and blood, which creates a horrible situation for readers.

Table 1: Imagery types

Types of Imagery	Keats: Ode to Psyche	Keats: Ode to Melancholy	Sassoon: Base Detail	Sassoon: Attack
Auditory Imagery	"Hushed cool-rooted flowers" "whispering of heaven"	"Bidding adieu"	"Guzzling and gulping" "young cheery old card"	"The barrages roar" "the spouting shells"
Olfactory Imagery	Fragrant-eyed	"Morning rose" "Yew berries"	No explicit example	"Smouldering through spout of drifting smoke that shroud"
Kinaesthetic Imagery	"Wreathed trellis of the working brain"	"Droop-headed flowers" "Bees-mouth sip"	"Guzzling and gulping in the hotel"	"Creep and topple forward" "floundering in mud"
Tactile imagery	"Cool-rooted flowers" "Soft-	"Pale fore head to be kissed" "Soft hands"	"Puffy faces" "Dying in bed"	"Floundering in mud"

	Conched ear” “Their arms embraced “			
Gustatory imagery	“Budded Tyrian” suggests the feeling of ripeness	“Poisonous wine”	No explicit example	No explicit example
Visual Imagery	“Two fair creatures, side by side” “Their Starry wings “ “Blue, silver, white and budded Tyrian”	“Pale forehead” “Ruby grapes of Proserpine” “Weeping cloud” “Droop headed flowers”	“Scarlet Majors” “Puffy petulant face” “Stone-dead”	“The ridge emerges, massed and dun” “Muttering face” “Masked with fear” “Menacing scared slope”

Discussion

The findings regarding Keats' use of paradoxical imagery have substantial integration for contemplating romantic aesthetic and cognitive literary theory. Keats's sensory ecosystem exemplifies what Alghadeer (2014) describes as "cognitive emotional resonance", where sensory patterns generate affective coherence. The paradoxes in his Odes also illustrate Sandy's (2019) view that paradox constitutes the generative core of poetic meaning, and they agree with the statement that the use of paradoxical imagery activates multiple areas of the brain.

This study uses the term "aesthetic alchemy" to describe Keats' ability to turn opposing feelings, such as pleasure and pain, into a single artistic experience through evocative imagery. This gives rise to the romantic belief that imagination can unify opposing concepts, leading to a profound sense of elevation. Keats's odes, therefore, function not merely as lyrical language but as cognitive architectures that transform imagery into philosophical thoughts.

Khan's (2025) cross-cultural study of Keats's imagery serves as a substantial parallel to the results of this study. His analysis reveals that Keats's use of visual imagery resonates with the broader Eastern tradition, and this study illustrates how these techniques were reshaped in western literature as it moved from romantic ideal to modernist expression of trauma. Collectively, these approaches affirm that sensory imagery remains a stable poetic element, despite changes in its architecture across different periods and traditions.

According to Sun (2020), Keats's sensory imagery forms the romantic groundwork that later shaped Modernist experimentation, in which Keats' imagery strives for coherence and spiritual elevation, while T.S. Eliot used the same tool to generate instability and discord. These shifts reveal the psychological strain of modern life. This study also shows that modernism evolved from romanticism, rejecting it through a psychoanalytic lens. McCormack (2018) tells the breakage of structures and ironic sensory effects in poems "base details" and "attack", where sensory tension in Sassoon's poems stems from ego-division rather than the stylistic preferences. This focus aligns with the study, as it addresses both emotional expressions and social critique. Moreover, this study explains how imagery works as a trauma-driven, poetic style.

Sassoon's deployment of ironic imagery sheds light on the modernist reorientation of poetic structures in response to trauma and historical rupture. The sensory conflicts in his war poems support trauma theory, which reveals how a sudden change in imagery can reflect the disintegrated nature of traumatic memory. The structural disorder in "attack" aligns with Vaara's (2021)

argument that Sensory imagery provides vivid mental mapping, making structures themselves a site of testimonial disruption and bearing the imprint of historical violence.

This technique marks a decisive shift in poetry's ethical and social commitment. In contrast to Keats's inward world, Sassoon uses sensory language as an instrument of critique. Despite romantic inwardness, he illustrates the epistemological gap between the public, presupposed heroism and the embodied realities of war. His poetry shows how modernists play with language, expressing meanings through interruption, contradiction, and structural breakdown despite unity. Comparing Keats and Sassoon exposes a significant shift in poetry from the romantic era to the modernist period. Keats uses sensory imagery to describe the symbolic structure of unity, while Sassoon employs the same technique to document the psychological fragmentation and socio-historical background.

The above discussion shows that the shift from romantic to modernist was not about themes, but about a new way of employing imagery to create more profound meaning. The same imagery serves opposite purposes: Keats uses sensory language to create unity among ideas, while Sassoon uses it to break them apart. This reflects the most significant historical changes in how writers understood human experience, memory, and truth.

Conclusion

A comparative study of sensory imagery in "ode to psyche" and "ode on melancholy" by Keats, and in "base detail" and "attack" by Sassoon, highlights a profound difference in how each poet contemplates the purpose of poetry. A deep analysis of their poems reveals not only contrasting styles but also opposite views of life and art. Keats's poems reflect harmony and superiority, while Sassoon's poems show chaos and bewilderment.

Keats uses imagery in both poems as a healing force. In "ode to psyche," he uses images like "cool rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed and soft-conched ear" to create a serene, dreamlike world that becomes a symbol of imagination in itself. The temple is built in the poet's mind, a reality the psyche lacks, showing that thoughts and imagination can create deep meaning.

The feelings turn inward in "ode on melancholy", where sensory imagery becomes more personal and physical. Imagery like "pale forehead, droop-headed flowers describes how love and pain mix within the body.

In both poems, imagery becomes the bridge between the soul and the body, transforming pain and longing into art and meaning.

Sassoon uniquely uses imagery to destroy and to expose the illusion. In "base detail", he uses satirical imagery which paints "scarlet Majors" and "puffy petulant faces" that are "guzzling and gulping", indicating the symbols of cowardice and moral corruption. Each imagery detail mocks the false heroism of war. The poem "attack" immerses readers in a violent, chaotic world where the sounds of "roaring guns, grey muttering faces, and floundering in mud" signal the collapse of spirit and protocol. The poem ends with the call, "O Jesus, Make it stop!", which reflects a moment of hopelessness. Sassoon's imagery, therefore, does not seek comfort but to expose the brutal truth of modern warfare.

The major shift in the history of poetry can be traced from Keats's imaginative temples to Sassoon's devastated war zone.

Keats's imagery embodies the creative power of imagination, turning pain into beauty and highlighting the dominance of romanticism. On the contrary, Sassoon's imagery, drawn from the trauma of the First World War, reflects the modernist mission to strip away the world of fantasy and face the brutal realities of life. Keats cultivates inner peace and sanctuaries while Sassoon

records their destruction. Therefore, their contrasting method like Keats's harmony and Sassoon's harshness, Keats's paradox and Sassoon's satire, proves that imagery is not a mere decoration but it is the structure through which poets express their vision of existence; whether they strive to rise for the eternal world or grapple with the fractured reality of modern life.

References

- Alghadeer, H. A. (2014). Digital landscapes: Rethinking poetry interpretation in multimodal texts. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(2), 87–96.
- Campbell, P. (2007). *Siegfried Sassoon: A study of the war poetry*. McFarland.
- Khan, I. (2025). Exploring visual imagery: A comparative study of the poetry of John Keats and Ghani Khan. *Arbor*, 12(1), 54–56.
- MaCormack, P. (2018). *Masculinity and shell shock in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon: Soldier of trauma and poet of abjection* (Doctoral dissertation, Middlesex University).
- Nersessian, A. (2021). *Keats's odes: A lover's discourse*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ricks, C. (1984). *Keats and embarrassment*. Oxford University Press.
- Sandy, M. (2019). Strange truths: Romantic reimaginings in Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. In *Literary and Cultural Alternatives to Modernism* (pp. 38–51). Routledge.
- Sassoon, S. (2012). *War poems of Siegfried Sassoon*. Courier Corporation.
- Sharma, D. (2014). Comparison and contrast: Shelley and Keats and their nature poetry. *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovation*, 2(1), 123–125.
- Sun, C. (2020). Sensory imagery study on John Keats's poems. (*Journal name missing—please provide for complete APA reference.*)
- Vaara, M. (2021). *"Intensities": The sensory dimensions of the poetry of the Great War* (Master's thesis).