

“Every Single Night’s a Fight”: Fiona Apple and the Nocturne

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Abstract This essay analyzes Fiona Apple’s 2012 single “Every Single Night” considering the musical and visual nocturne, calling attention to how the ethereal and melancholy spirit of the night is evoked through lyricism and musicality. The song speaks to the trials associated with sleeplessness and insomnia, while the music video employs night-time aesthetics to create a highly sensual listening and viewing experience, leading us to a deeper understanding of how music and visuals can work together to conjure the emotions of a restless night. I also discuss the gendered aspects of the nocturne, arguing that Apple powerfully appropriates a genre which has historically been shunned by male critics. Using scientific research on sleep disorders, I briefly explore the intimate though, at times, fraught relationship between mind and body.

Résumé Cet essai analyse la chanson « Every Single Night » de Fiona Apple (2012) à la lumière du nocturne musical et visuel, en mettant en évidence la manière dont l’esprit éthéré et mélancolique de la nuit est évoqué à travers le lyrisme et la musicalité. Cette chanson aborde les épreuves associées à l’insomnie, tandis que la vidéo musicale recourt à une esthétique nocturne pour créer une expérience d’écoute et de visionnage très sensuelle, nous guidant vers une compréhension plus profonde de la manière dont la musique et le visuel peuvent s’agencer pour évoquer les émotions d’une nuit agitée. J’aborde également les aspects genrés du nocturne, en affirmant qu’Apple s’approprie puissamment un genre de musique historiquement dédaigné par les critiques masculins. À l’aide de recherches scientifiques sur les troubles du sommeil, j’explore brièvement la relation intime, parfois tendue, entre l’esprit et le corps.

Keywords nocturne; insomnia; ethereality; emotion

*Every single night
I endure the flight
Of little wings of white-flamed
Butterflies in my brain
(Apple 2012, lines 1-4)*

These are the opening lines to Fiona Apple's 2012 single "Every Single Night," which describes the nightly struggle between sleep and an overactive brain, the inability to rest while one's mind is teeming with thoughts and ideas. In the song, Apple highlights how physically painful this process can be, and designates the night as a time of heightened feeling and emotion. The accompanying music video enhances this haunting vision of the night, using imagery and lighting which emphasize the hallucinatory and dream-like state of this temporality. In this essay, I will analyze "Every Single Night" in light of the musical and visual nocturne, calling attention to how the ethereal and melancholy spirit of the night is evoked through lyricism and musicality. The song speaks to the trials associated with sleeplessness and insomnia, while the music video employs night-time aesthetics to create a highly sensual listening and viewing experience, leading us to a deeper understanding of how music and visuals can work together to conjure the emotions of a restless night. Using research on sleep disorders, I explore the intimate, though at times fraught, relationship between mind and body. I also discuss the gendered aspects of the nocturne, arguing that Apple powerfully appropriates a genre which has historically been shunned by male critics.

The nocturne as a musical genre was born in 1812, when the classical composer John Field titled one of his works as such (Temperly 1975, 340). This would be the first in a series of nocturnes by the composer and the classification would later be adopted by other 19th century composers such as Chopin and Liszt (Temperly 1975, 337). By their original definition, nocturnes were piano solos meant to be performed at night, whose melodies sought to replicate the sound of the human voice (Piggot 1968, 55). These pieces were heavily inspired by the Romantic movement of the time and were interpreted by audiences as "love poem[s] sung by a man to a woman" (Kallberg 1992, 114). Various scholars have attempted to point to the formal characteristics that define a nocturne; Temperly (1975) describes a technique wherein, "a low bass note was played and caught by the pedal, and the left hand was free to fill in a rich accompaniment figure in the middle register until the harmony changed," which he refers to as the "nocturne texture" (338). Kallberg points to a number of other features characteristic of nocturnes, such as their "brevity and ornateness" (1992, 110), "widely spanned broken chords," "downbeat accents," and the echoing of the opening notes in the finale (1988, 238).

However, it is difficult to designate any single technical element as essential to the creation of a nocturne, in part because nocturnes are themselves a rejection of traditional musical form. In his introduction to Field's nocturnes, Franz Liszt (1902) writes that, "Field was the first to introduce a style in no way derived from the established categories, and in which

feeling and melody, freed from the trammels of coercive form, reign supreme" (introduction). Liszt (1902) goes on to write of the nocturnes:

"To analyze the charm of their spontaneity would be a vain task. They emanate solely from a temperament like that of Field. For him, invention and facility were one, diversity of form a necessity, as is usually the case with those who are filled to overflowing with emotion" (introduction).

On account of this inherent "diversity of form," many nocturnes appear to resist classification. Kallberg (1988) uses the example of Chopin's Nocturne in G Minor, writing that the piece "seems almost to defy its type" (238), upending normative definitions of the genre. This leads Kallberg to treat the nocturne more as a socially constructed genre rather than analyzing works strictly through a music-theory lens. As he writes:

"having rejected the notion that genre functions only as a classificatory category located solely in compositions, I adopted instead an understanding of genre as a communicative concept shared by composers and listeners alike, one that therefore actively informs the experience of a musical work" (Kallberg 1992, 103)

Kallberg (1992) also finds this to be an important methodological move regarding the nocturne due to its association with the feminine realm. He discusses how musical nocturnes have historically been regarded as feminine, particularly by male critics. One such critic is G.W Fink, whom Kallberg (1992) quotes as saying, "the Nocturnes are really reveries of a soul fluctuating from feeling to feeling in the still of the night, about which we want to set down nothing but the outburst of a feminine heart" (104). This association with femininity was not a value-neutral assessment, but led to the denigration of the nocturne by many critics such as Ferdinand Hand, who wrote that, "the representation of sentiment in the notturno runs the danger of falling into the effeminate and languishing, which displeases stronger souls and altogether tires the listener" (Kallberg 1992, 105).

Kallberg thus problematizes traditional music analysis in regards to the nocturne, as he writes that "projects that veer toward a note-by-note mapping of musical discourse onto structures of feminist thought may, by privileging composer-centered concepts over societal ones, unconsciously promote the patriarchal agendas they ostensibly would deny" (1992, 126). Rather than deeming certain elements of the compositions themselves "feminine," which would only serve to enforce normative notions of gender, Kallberg (1992) instead chooses to

focus on how nocturnes were interpreted by consumers of the genre, who were, by and large, women, and how female composers related to the genre.

But if the nocturne cannot be characterized solely by formal elements, what is the communicative concept, to borrow Kallberg's language, that identifies a nocturne as such? In her chapter, "'Sounds and Scents Turn in the Evening Air': Sense and Synaesthesia in Popular Song Settings of Baudelaire's Evening Harmony," Caroline Ardrey (2019) discusses different musical adaptations of Baudelaire's poetry in light of Frantz Liszt's characterization of the musical nocturne. She explains that, "as a musical form, the nocturne is associated with and, one might even say, defined by ethereal evocations of the night" (Ardrey 2019, 98). Another aspect of the musical nocturne involves the meditative nature of the night, wherein mind supersedes body. As Ardrey (2019) explains, "Liszt conceives of the effect of the aesthetic experience of the nocturne as operating on a vertical plane, with evening serving as a particularly apt moment for self-contemplation, in which the physical body is transcended" (103-104).

Due to its fluidity, the nocturne is also a genre primed for adaptation. Ardrey (2019) points to Kate Bush and Bjork as modern-day artists who have adapted the musical nocturne, writing that, "since the nineteenth century, the nocturne form has been appropriated by numerous musical figures and genres, not only within the sphere of classical music, but also within the world of popular and modern experimental music" (98). This understanding of the nocturne as more feeling than form allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how the works of prolific modern-day artists such as Fiona Apple harken back to earlier iterations of the nocturne.

"Every Single Night" certainly contains some of the musical elements characteristic of the nocturne; the minimal instrumentals and sparse chords provide the backdrop, while her vocals supply the melody traditionally provided by the left hand accompaniment. But beyond this, it contains the true essence of a nocturne. The genre's signature ethereality is present from the first notes of the song, beginning with the dainty and graceful notes of a toy music box which, "makes Apple sound like a ballerina spinning out of control" (Billboard 2012). The notion of night as a time where mind transcends body is also present in Apple's writing, as she describes an experience which simultaneously is rooted in, and goes beyond the bodily senses. In the first verse, she sings:

*These ideas of mine
Percolate the mind*

*Trickle down the spine
Swarm the belly, swelling to a blaze
That's where the pain comes in
Like a second skeleton
Trying to fit beneath the skin
I can't fit the feelings in
(Apple 2012, lines 5-12)*

In this description, ideas, thoughts, and feelings take on a physical form, traversing from brain to gut. Words such as "trickle," and "swelling," highlight the tangible aspect of this experience; at the same time, this process is decidedly intangible, and is constructed in opposition to the boundaries of the body itself. This can be seen in the imagery of pain as a "second skeleton" which cannot be contained within the corporeal form. The conflict between body and mind is made clear again in the chorus, which contain repetitions of the phrases "every single night's a fight with my brain," and "every single night's alight with my brain" (Apple 2012, lines 13 & 24).

This struggle is representative of the artist's own fight with insomnia and restlessness, as a Vulture profile of Apple revealed that, "while she has struggled with sleep since she was a child, it has become in recent years a constant antagonist" (Lee 2012, para. 2). While from a philosophical perspective, this framing of sleep as an antagonist with mind and body being in conflict with each other serves as a useful metaphor, the reality is that there is constant interaction between these two entities. Feelings and senses are perpetually acting upon and influencing each other. A study by Wassing et al. (2019) found evidence to support their hypothesis that, "the pattern of neuronal activity elicited by reliving emotional memories from the distant past resembles the pattern elicited by novel emotional experiences more in insomnia disorder than in normal sleepers" (1785). What this suggests is that, compared to normal sleepers, those with insomnia experience memories of past experiences closer to how they would a fresh emotional wound. This was supported by the finding that while normal sleepers activated different parts of their brain when remembering a past emotional experience, for those with insomnia, "the brain circuits recruited with reliving distant emotional memories overlapped with the circuits recruited during a novel emotional experience" (Wassing et al. 2019, 1790). In light of these findings, it is interesting to consider the possibility that Apple portrays her memories and thoughts as physically painful because she is describing the process of how "every single night," past experiences and emotions are felt anew in a very literal sense.

The melancholy, dream-like state that Apple portrays in her song also extends to the accompanying music video, in line with the visual nocturne employed by painters and photographers. As William Sharpe (1988) writes, "the nocturne altered expectations about the kinds of truths art should reveal, subversively posing its delicate balance of romantic mystery and abstract form against the mainstream preoccupation with narrative and hard-edged mimeticism" (7). Throughout the music video, eerie and haunting scenes of Apple flash across the screen; rolling around in the dirt covered in snails, in bed next to a minotaur, wearing a ballgown and tossing fish to an alligator. These seemingly abstract images, which follow no narrative structure, create a sense of frenzied delirium, evoking the very emotions Apple describes as her experience of the nighttime, a constant and unending stream of ideas. The imagery of the music video speaks to the lack of control Apple references in her lyrics; for example, in some scenes she is attached to strings like a marionette doll while viewers look down on her from an observation deck. In one part of the video, she is seen playing with the figurine of a hula doll, while in another, she herself is dressed as a hula doll, representing how she is at the mercy of her own mind. This, again, speaks to Liszt's (1902) conception of the night as a time where the physical body is transcended.

Sharpe (1988) also adds that "the liminality of the nocturne form" positions it at the intersection of "nature and the city" (7). The urban and natural elements of the night are very apparent in the "Every Single Night" music video; on the one hand, there is a rich earthiness to some scenes, as she is seen surrounded by the natural elements of earth and water, as well as various critters and creatures. On the other hand, there is a clearly cosmopolitan component, as Apple is pictured walking through the streets of Paris, with a dazzlingly lit Eiffel Tower in the background. The marriage between these two is perhaps best encompassed by a single image: Apple stands on a bridge, while behind her, a snail of mammoth proportions and an illuminated Eiffel Tower occupy the frame.



In addition to the relationship between nature and the city, this image also speaks to larger themes regarding the relationship between light and dark. Tim Edensor (2015) argues that

contrary to the idea that these are two opposite and conflicting entities, darkness and light are inextricably intertwined and acquire their meaning through the contrast between each other. As he writes, "the glamour of the bright lights of the big city depends upon the dark amidst which they shine and on the darker spaces against which they are contrasted" (Edensor 2015, 434). While there are certainly moments of blinding light, this light is complemented by and contrasted to the dark and gloomy atmosphere of the video. Shadows are created through the use of pink and blue-hued lights which come, at times, from unusual sources, such as one scene where Apple is lit by the glow emitted from a fish tank.

As is typical of genres which are deemed "feminine," Apple's work has indeed tended to resonate with female audiences while being devalued by male critics. Nussbaum (2020) writes that Apple, "was adored by her fans but also mocked, and leered at, by the male-dominated rock press, who often treated her as a tabloid curiosity—a bruised prodigy to be both ogled and pitied" (para. 16). The critical reception to the song echoes earlier reviews of nocturnes, with one critic proclaiming, "it's a delicate and quirky track, but are we the only ones hoping there's a bit more stomp and spirit to at least some of the other tunes on *Idler Wheel?*" (Daw 2012). While the song was not directly criticized for its connection to the feminine, the link between femininity and emotion (or hysteria) underlies these critiques. One *Billboard* (2012) review called the song a "tortured tale that includes Sylvia Plath-esque lines," and later went on to state, "the lyrics aren't the only aspect of the sparse song that feels bipolar." A *Guardian* review warned that the song "teeters on the brink of exploding with emotion" (Cragg 2012, para. 5).

Some reviewers, particularly female critics, recognized this as a strength rather than a deficit. Ann Powers of NPR wrote of Apple:

"A classically lovely woman whose gorgeous, sultry alto once led her toward alt-divadom, Apple has always dared herself to be and do something else: to say no to simple beauty and instead express the urges and insecurities that more accommodating artists tend to avoid" (Powers 2012, para. 2)

Critics were also forced to concede that while the song lacked mass appeal, it deeply resonated with a core group of listeners, as one reviewer stated, "Apple's single isn't a 'Criminal' sequel, and radio airplay doesn't appear to be the goal here. Yet it's fair to deem 'Every Single Night' a triumphant comeback by being exactly what Apple's cult of devotees has been yearning for" (*Billboard* 2012). As a female artist, Apple chose to embrace a genre which critics derided for its association with femininity, despite the scorn it earned her from

the male-dominated rock press. I believe this is, at least in part, why she has amassed such a cult following among young women. Rather than shying away from the emotion which led the nocturne to be discredited by critics, she leaned into it in full force while providing a woman's perspective which is absent from earlier iterations of the genre. In this way, her work can be seen as a reclamation of a historically devalued genre.

In 1902, Franz Liszt wrote of John Field, the originator of the nocturne:

"His form will not grow old, because it is perfectly adapted to his conceptions, which do not belong to a class of temporary, transient sentiments, called into being by the influence of his environment at the time, but are pure emotions which will forever cast their spell over the heart of man" (introduction)

I believe the same can be said of Fiona Apple; staying true to the core communicative concept of the nocturne through evocations of ethereality and emotion, Apple presents a different vision of the night, exploring darker themes than those present in earlier nocturnes. While nocturnes were traditionally works by male composers geared towards female audiences, serving as proclamations of romantic love from a man to a woman, "Every Single Night" represents the night as a time of deep inner turmoil and angst. In Apple's work, the night is understood as a time where thoughts and emotions run free in ways that are both magical and mysterious, allowing us to transcend the mundanity of daily life.

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