



“OH, CRUELTY, TO STEAL MY BASIL-POT AWAY FROM ME!”: THE REFLECTION OF BEREAVEMENT IN JOHN KEATS' ISABELLA, OR THE POT OF BASIL

“AH ZALİMLİK BU, FESLEĞEN SAKSIMI BENDEN ALMAK!”: YAS SÜRECİNİN JOHN KEATS'İN “ISABELLA, YA DA FESLEĞEN SAKSISI”NDAKİ YANSIMASI

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Abstract

This paper analyses John Keats' *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil* through the theories of bereavement and attachment as a poetic reflection of these processes with regard to Isabella's grief after the unanticipated death of her lover Lorenzo and her (in)ability to cope with and how she maintains an unhealthy process of bereavement. Attachment styles, which begin with a human's first relationship with the mother, represent the type and nature of the emotional bond with the significant other. Losing the attachment figure is associated with different reactions during bereavement. In this respect, it will be discussed that Isabella does not experience a healthy bereavement process as a result of her anxious attachment style and she cannot make sense and cope with her lover's death. Therefore, she continues her bond with Lorenzo in a delirious manner, that is, through cutting his head and putting it into a pot in which she grows the basil. The poem has been examined in terms of Isabella's insecure attachment style, emotions, reactions, and continuing bonds, along with a traumatic and sudden loss.

Öz

Bu çalışma John Keats'in *Isabella, ya da Fesleğen Saksısı* şiirini yas ve bağlanma kuramları kullanarak incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Şiir, Isabella'nın sevgilisi Lorenzo'nun beklenmeyen kaybı ile baş edememesi ve sürdürdüğü sağlıklı yas sürecinin bir yansıması olarak ele alınmıştır. İnsanların anneleri ile kurdukları ilk ilişki ile başlayan bağlanma stilleri, insanların hayatlarındaki önemli kişilerle kurdukları duygusal bağın türünü ve yapısını temsil eder. Bağlanma figürünü kaybetmek yas sürecinde gösterilen farklı tepkilerle ilişkilidir. Isabella, sahip olduğu kaygılı bağlanma stili nedeniyle sevgilisinin ölümünü anlamlandıramaz ve bu durumla baş edemez. Bu bağlamda, sağlıklı bir yas süreci yaşamadığı söylenebilir. Sonuçta Lorenzo ile kurduğu bağı hezeyanlarla sürdürür: Onun kafasını kesip bir saksıya koyarak üzerinde fesleğen yetiştirir. Bu eserde, Isabella'nın yaşadığı ani ve travmatik kayıp; güvensiz bağlanma stili, duygular, tepkiler ve sürdürülen bağlar açılarından incelenmiştir.

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This paper mainly aims to analyze John Keats' *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil* as a literary reflection of how people (cannot) make sense of and adapt themselves to bereavement through examining Isabella's insecure attachment to the basil to be able to cope with the unexpected death of her lover Lorenzo, which creates an unhealthy process of bereavement and finally leads her to her tragic end. Keats' *Isabella*, a successful example which demonstrates the literary power of understanding and conveying traumatic events and people's reactions to these events, is different from the other literary pieces which include bereavement processes in terms of both narrative style and content. Representative of gothic movement in the English Romantic Age, *Isabella* as a multifaceted poem is open to various theoretical analyses. Furthermore, application of bereavement and attachment theories in modern psychology to this poem will contribute to the academic studies on this subject through providing a novel perspective.

The title of the poem, *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*¹, has a symbolic significance. Basil is one of the frequently used symbols in legends and literatures and one of the complex ones whose “associations include such polar opposites as love and hate, danger and protection and life and death” (“basil”). Its symbolic complexity attracts many poets and writers who want a strong symbol for the feelings they aim to convey in their works. John Keats; however, is the one who efficiently and poetically makes use of basil as a symbol embodying its both positive and negative connotations vigorously linking them to the bereavement process.

Loss/death of a beloved one and grief afterwards have been dealt with in literature from the ancient to the modern times. Antigone’s grief for her brother and her struggle to be able to grieve after him and for closure, Isabella’s grief after the loss of her lover in *Decameron*, which inspired Keats to write this poem in the nineteenth century, Hamlet’s complicated grief due to his indecisiveness to take revenge for his father, elegies of the 18th century, war poems of the 20th century are all examples of successful and unsuccessful bereavement processes. Yet, pathological processes of bereavement have almost always attracted attention more than successful processes of bereavement have.

Isabella, the Pot of Basil, one of the narrative poems of John Keats who adapted the tragic love story from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, deals with Isabella’s love and her unsuccessful coping with the loss of her beloved. Isabella begins as a typical love story. Fair young lady falls in love with poor Lorenzo. Both experience symptoms of love sickness. Isabella’s cheeks blush: “Sweet Isabella’s untouched cheek/Fell sick within the rose’s just domain” (329, 33-35); and Lorenzo’s heart beats when he plans to speak to her: “His heat beat awfully against his side/And to his heart he inwardly did pray/For power to speak” (329, 41-44). Although their love turns to a “great bliss” and “grew like a lusty flower in June’s caress” (331, 70-71), her two brothers “enriched from an ancestral merchandise” (333, 106) do not want to marry off Isabella to a servant of their business; on the contrary, they plan “to coax her by degrees/to some high noble and his olive trees” (336, 167-168). When this plan did not work on Isabella, they decide to bury him without telling their sister and even lying to her about Lorenzo’s absence. Yet, her dream reveals Lorenzo’s whereabouts through Lorenzo’s ghost who tells where he is buried and one night Isabella and her maid finds his dead body. Isabella fervently cuts his

¹ All references to *Isabella* are taken from this collection: John Keats. *Isabella or the Pot of Basil* in *The Poems of John Keats*. Ed. Miriam Allott. London and New York: Longman, 1970.

beloved's dead head and takes it to home secretly to put it into a garden pot. However, her grief does not end with her learning the truth; on the contrary, her devastating sorrow gradually increases. She becomes obsessed with the pot in which she grows basil fed with her continuing sorrow. Through her attachment to the basil pot, she is totally detached from life. Realizing her detachment from life, her brothers notice her extreme attachment to the pot and finally the cut head of Lorenzo. They take it away from Isabella, which actually causes her to die of sorrow.

Isabella, or the Pot of Basil was examined by using attachment theory because it helps better understand Isabella's reactions to the loss of her lover. Therefore, in order to enhance comprehension, the basics of the theory and the related concepts will be introduced before the analysis of the poem. Attachment concept was originated by J. Bowlby, a psychoanalyst who had an impact on the psychology literature with his trilogy *Attachment and Loss*. Attachment was defined as an emotional bond between the caregiver and the child (Bowlby 1:177). The function of being close to the caregiver is to feel physically and psychologically secure. Therefore, the child needs an available and responsive person. When the attachment figure is not available, the child feels "separation distress" and behaves in ways to regain the proximity. His theory was used to examine close relationships in adulthood as well as caregiver-child relationships (Hazan and Shaver 511, Ainsworth et al. 255). A positive interaction (caring and nurturing) between the mother and the child helps the development of a "secure attachment," which will contribute to a positive interpersonal and close relationship in the child's adulthood via "working models" of relationships (Bowlby 1:80). On the other hand, insecure attachment is characterized with a negative interaction. According to the caregiver's responses, the child can develop "avoidant attachment" and distances himself/herself from the important figures in his/her life, or he/she develops "anxious attachment" and continues to need and fear to lose the important figures. Therefore, although the need for attachment is universal, there are individual differences depending on the person's personality, the availability and the reactions of the attachment figure as well as the responses of both parties to separation.

Considering attachment as a lifelong need for a loved one, a related question is "what happens when the loved one dies?" The answer lies within the analysis of the bereavement which can be defined as the process of grief after the death of a loved one. Bowlby elaborates on the death of the attachment figure and the reactions following loss (2:9). This adaptation process may include a need to feel attached or

close to the person who was lost. Similar to a child seeking his/her mother to relieve the anxiety created by the mother's unavailability, an adult experiences distress in the absence of the attachment figure and goes through some stages to cope with the loss. According to Bowlby, just after the loss, people experience a "protest phase" in which the person feels distressed and tries to restructure the physical closeness to the attachment figure (3:42). An example behavior of this phase is an urge to look for the attachment figure, who is lost. Visiting the places that were visited together, perceiving others' faces similar to the one or hearing the voices of others as if they were coming from the lost one (Field, Gao and Paderna 277). According to Bowlby, "despair" follows the protest phase, in which the person realizes that the loss is permanent and the behavior to continue the bond gradually decreases. Researchers agree that attachment styles are important during the adaptation process with the loss of the attachment figure (Stroebe 127). "Continuing bonds" is a term to represent an enduring inner relationship with the deceased person (Shuchter and Zisook 24). There are different ways to continue the bond with the deceased. Remembering the memories, maintaining the possessions of the person and sensing the person's presence are some means to continue the relationship with the person (Field 113). It does not necessarily mean that having the need to continue the relationship is abnormal. There are different factors to consider in deciding the adaptive or maladaptive function of continuing bonds. First, the function of continuing bonds is to alleviate the pain at short term. If they last for a long time, then the process becomes pathological. Another criterion that makes continuing bond pathological is keeping materials to maintain the attachment bond. Hanging on to the deceased attachment figure's belongings and keeping the materials at sight are associated with more distress. On the other hand, maintaining the bond via thoughts and memories is associated with less distress (Field et al. 297).

According to the attachment theories, the nature of separation is considered as an important factor in terms of bereavement. Sudden deaths are related to a worse well-being (Caserta et. al 463). When a strong bond and an unexpected death come together, the bereavement process is more detrimental for the person (Stroebe et. al 127). Being unable to prepare oneself to being without the loved one or using a proactive coping strategy; for instance, preparing oneself for future stressful events, is not possible in the case of unexpected losses. People usually do not prefer to consider the possibility of loss of the loved ones. However, in terms of chronic

illnesses, they may consider how to cope with a future loss and prepare themselves for bereavement.

Keats presents a love story in which Isabella's bereavement process is recounted in detail. Isabella and Lorenzo become attached to each other in a gloomy and dark atmosphere enriching it with his word choices and his description of their love and passion. Even in the very beginning, their love does not begin with cheerful encounters, but with crying during sleepless nights. Lorenzo deduces her love for him from her tone and the way she talks: "[...] here she ceased her timid quest,/But in her tone and look he read the rest" (330, 55-56). In this way, they become each other's *significant other*, which implies forming of an emotional bond, that is, attachment.

The romantic relationship between Isabella and Lorenzo includes insecure attachment symptoms such as fear of separation. Isabella undergoes the characteristics of anxious attachment style. An anxiously attached person feels a strong desire to stay very close to the significant other and at the same time worries about losing that connection. (Hazan and Shaver 515). According to Ainsworth and colleagues when a child receives inconsistent responses to his/her needs of attachment, he/she cannot be sure whether the needs will be fulfilled and because of this uncertainty, the child develops an anxious attachment (Ainsworth et al 314). In the case of Isabella, mother and father figures are missing and the brothers provide no caring or approval for her. Adults with anxious attachment style usually become emotionally dependent to their partners and exhibit a strong negative reaction to their partner's loss (Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies 249). They also have problems with affect regulation in stressful situations (Mikullincer, Shaver and Pereg 77) which makes the bereavement process even harder. This anxious attachment of Isabella foretells her future desperation:

Believe how I love thee, believe how near
My soul is to its doom. I would not grieve
Thy hand by unwelcome pressing, would not fear
Thine eyes by gazing, but I cannot live
Another night and not my passion shrive. (331, 60-64).

This fear of separation is repeated in the text several times as a foreshadowing element in the language and description. Even in the instances of happiness, something disturbing interrupts the peaceful moment: "*Great bliss was with them, and great happiness/Grew like a lusty flower in June's caress*" (331, 60-64). As it is

emphasized with the image of lusty flower, their love grows very passionately, yet “lusty” flower has also negative connotations when compared to typical successful love stories. It implies that their love is growing passionately and fast, yet it also denotes an end to their passionate love will come soon in a desperate way.

Even before their love is completed and consummated, their attachment is disrupted by her brothers who killed and buried Lorenzo without the knowledge of Isabella. Her fear of separation becomes real and she has to confront the loss of the attachment figure, Lorenzo. Due to her anxious attachment, she experiences poignant feelings upon Lorenzo’s sudden and unexpected absence.

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be,
Sorely she wept until the night came on,
And then, instead of love, O misery!
She brooded o’er the luxury alone.
His image in the dusk she seemed to see,
And to the silence made a gentle moan,
Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,
And on her couch low murmuring, ‘Where? Oh, where?’ (340-341,
233-240).

She continuously cries, is lost in thought, dreams of Lorenzo’s arrival, and tries to understand his meaningless abandonment: “[...] *what dungeon climes/ Could keep him off so long?*” (340, 259-260). She asks her brothers about Lorenzo’s whereabouts. When her questions are not resolved, her well-being deteriorates gradually: “*so sweet Isabel/ By gradual decay from beauty fell/ Because Lorenzo came not*” (340, 255-256). Since uncertainty results in anxiety, her anxiety cannot be relieved and even gets worse as uncertainty of Lorenzo’s disappearance continues (Izard and Tomkins 123).

This destructive uncertainty is broken with the vision in which Lorenzo’s ghost invites Isabella to his tomb with pastoral descriptions. Lorenzo’s ghost wants her to come to his eternal bed and grieve over his death: “*Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom/ And it shall comfort me within the tomb*” (343, 303-304). Lorenzo’s wish will not only comfort him in his tomb but it will also end this unfinished business and provide closure for their incomplete love.

Insecure attachment of Isabella to Lorenzo profoundly affects her reactions towards his death. Isabella wants to continue her bond with deceased Lorenzo, as she has nothing for consolation. She maintains this bond through cutting Lorenzo’s

head and takes it to home, which signals an unhealthy process of bereavement. Upon Lorenzo's ghost's wish, Isabella finds the tomb and "*with her knife, all sudden, she began/To dig more fervently than misers can*" (345, 368-369). After three hours of labour, Isabella finally reaches the grave but her reaction is extraordinary. A healthy bereavement process may include the reactions of shock, grief, anger and sometimes depression and guilt (Kübler-Ross 26, 31); however, "*Isabella did not stamp and rave*" (346, 383). Her calmness reveals the fact that she cannot accept her lover's death and still tries to possess his love in a material way: "*Pale Isabella kissed it, and low moaned/'Twas Love-cold, dead indeed, but not dethroned*" (347, 399-400). She kisses the cold and dead head affectionately, which she was never able to accomplish while Lorenzo was alive. In this way, she substitutes her love with Lorenzo's head. For Isabella, love is now identified with Lorenzo's head:

In anxious secrecy they took it home,
And then the prize was all for Isabel.
She calmed its wild hair with a golden comb,
And all around each eye's sepulchral cell
Pointed each fringed lash. The smeared loam
With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,
She drenched away-and still she combed, and kept
Sighing all day-and still she kissed, and wept. (347, 401-408).

The head, which symbolizes the eternal love, was a prize for her. She treats the head as a kind of toy, which belongs to only Isabella. Indeed, the head does not even belong to Lorenzo after scattered from his body. She combs his hair and clears the remains of the soil with her tears. Her treatment of the head displays an unhealthy continuing bond.

She puts the head into a garden pot on which she sews basil and waters it with her tears. She isolates herself from life. She forgets "*the stars, the moon and sun,*" "*the blue above the trees,*" "*the dells where waters run,*" "*the chilly autumn breeze.*" She becomes totally obsessed with the pot:

For seldom did she go to chapel-shrift,
And seldom felt she any hunger-pain.
And when she left, she hurried back, as swift
As bird on wing to breast its eggs again,
And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there
Beside her basil, weeping through her hair. (350, 467-472).

Her love identified with the head shifts to the basil she grows with tears. This isolation from time and place and obsession with the basil detach her from life. Her detachment from life and her interest in the basil pot make her brothers suspect and they urge to open the pot only to find Lorenzo's "green and livid" head. They left Florence to get away from the responsibility of their murder, which leaves Isabella lonely. Left without any object that can be associated with Lorenzo, Isabella feels totally empty:

For Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die –
Will die a death too lone and incomplete,
Now they have ta'en away her basil sweet. (350, 486-488).

After taken away the basil pot, she cannot find any medium to continue her bond and complete her love with Lorenzo. She grieves after the loss of the basil pot by crying and asking why in a delirious way:

Piteous she looked on dead and senseless things,
Asking for her lost basil amourosly.
And with melodius chuckle in the strings
Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry
After the pilgrim in his wanderings,
To ask him where her basil was, and why
'Twas hid from her: 'For cruel 'tis,'said she,
To steal my basil-pot away from me.' (350, 486-488).

She cannot cope with the events that she has lived through and "*die[s] forlorn/Imploring for her basil to the last*" (351, 497-498).

In conclusion, the traumatic death and bereavement process afterwards *in Isabella or the Pot of Basil* are analyzed in the framework of attachment and bereavement theories. Considering Isabella's attachment style as anxious, she develops an emotional bond with Lorenzo including dependence and a fear of separation. The tragic death after an unexpected disappearance of Lorenzo results in an unhealthy bereavement process. The attempts to continue her bond with Lorenzo turns into an obsession with the basil pot. She cannot cope with the loss of her last attachment object, which brings about her death. This paper aims to contribute to literary studies with its analysis of the poem within the framework of attachment theory, which has already been analyzed with various theories, and to psychological studies through providing examples to the concepts of anxious attachment, bereavement and continuing bonds.

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