

## Through the Crucible of Absence: The Dark Night of the Soul as a Purgative Threshold in Mystical Experience

---

**1.K. Kokila**

Ph. D. Scholar, PG& Research Department of English, M. V. Muthiah Govt Arts College for Women- Dindigul (Affiliated to Mother Teresa Women's University- Kodaikanal)

**2.Dr. R. Karthika Devi**

Assistant Professor, PG& Research Department of English, M. V. Muthiah Govt Arts College for Women- Dindigul

---

Paper Received on 10-07-2026, Accepted on 12-08-2026

Published on 13-08-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.08.435

---

### Abstract:

The paper investigates the phenomenon of the *Dark Night of the Soul* not merely as a state of passive spiritual devastation, but as an indispensable and an active threshold within the broader architecture of the mystical experience. Drawing primarily upon the foundational 16<sup>th</sup> century treatise *Dark Night of the Soul* by the Spanish Mystic St. John of the Cross. The study explores the profound paradox of divine absence. It asserts that the intense psychological and spiritual suffering characterizing the dark night serves as a vital, dual purgative function. The systematic dismantling of the ego's sensory attachments and its subsequent spiritual dependencies. By examine the structural transition from spiritual aridity to the awakening of unitive consciousness, the paper demonstrates that the dark night symbolizes a necessary psychological and ontological restructuring a profound ego-death required to sustain ultimate spiritual ecstasy and permanent mystical union.

### Introduction

In the study of mysticism, spiritual ecstasy is frequently conceptualized as a radiant, unmediated encounter with the divine, characterized by overwhelming joy, boundless light and a profound sense of cosmic oneness. However, the foundational literature of mystical theology reveals a stark, the path to ultimate illumination invariably winds through a landscape of absolute desolation. The most articulate framework for this borrowing shift is found in the works of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite friar and mystic, St. John of the Cross. He is widely known for his writings, especially his poetry and his studies on the development of the soul are considered the summit of mystical Christian literature among the greatest works of all Spanish literature.

His work the *Dark Night of the Soul* displays an agonizing period of spiritual abandonment, existential dryness and profound interior darkness. It outlines how God purifies the soul passively and brings the theological life to the perfection. The paper argues that the Dark night of the Soul operates as a crucial purgative threshold. It is an existential crucible wherein the soul's absence of divine comfort is paradoxically, the very mechanism that purifies its faculties. By systematically dismantling the ego's sensory and spiritual attachments, this profound void prepares the human consciousness to receive the unmitigated fullness of spiritual ecstasy. St. John divides the Dark Night into two distinct, successive phases, each targeting a different layer of human consciousness. Hence one night of purgation is sensory, by which the senses are purged and accommodated to the spirit; and the other night or purgation is spiritual, by which the spirit is purged and denuded as well as accommodated and prepared for union with God through love. Together, they execute a radical psychological restructuring.

#### **The Passive Night of the Senses**

The journey begins when the initial joy of the spiritual awakening abruptly vanishes. In this phase, the mystic experiences an acute form of spiritual aridity. Spiritual practices that once brought deep emotional satisfaction, meditation, prayer contemplation, suddenly feel completely hollow, cold and mechanical. God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, he does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything. This is the passive purgation of the senses.

Human psychology naturally seeks pleasure and early in the spiritual progress, the ego easily shifts its attachment from worldly pleasures to spiritual ones. Mystics call this as a "spiritual gluttony" which is the habit of practicing devotion merely to enjoy the comforting, peaceful feelings it produces. The night of the senses abruptly cuts off this emotional reward system. By plunging the sensory facilities into darkness, the soul is forced to outgrow its infantile dependence on pleasant feelings, transferring its motivation from a selfish love of divine comforts to a selfless love of the divine itself.

#### **The Passive Night of the Spirit**

While the sensory night cleans the lower desires, the night of the spirit is a far deeper, more terrifying crucible here, the purgation strikes at a very root of human identity. It includes the intellect, the will and the memory. In this phase, the mystic feels entirely abandoned, rejected and cast out by the divine. The suffering is not merely the absence of comfort, but a crushing sense of personal unworthiness and spiritual blindness. The soul feels as though it is being destroyed. Psychologically, this represents the ultimate crisis of ego's death. The mind's sophisticated concepts of God, its spiritual pride and its subtle reliance on its own virtue are entirely burned away. The soul is stripped of its own self narratives, learning it in a state of absolute nakedness. It is precisely within this utter helplessness that the deepest transformation

occurs where the human will be completely emptied so that it can eventually be aligned with a higher reality.

### **The paradox of divine darkness as light**

To understand why this suffering is necessary, one must look at the theological framework of apophysis, the understanding of the ultimate reality transcends all human concepts, words and images. The bitter experience in the dark night is not caused by an absence of the divine, but by an excess of it. Just as the human eye is instantly blinded if it shares directly into the midday sun, the limited human intellect and its ego structure experience the overwhelming, blinding proximity of the divine as absolute darkness.

St. John of the Cross explains that the divine light is pouring into the soul so intensely that's the soul's natural faculties cannot process it; hence, it registers as a profound void. Therefore, the "crucible of absence" is a supreme psychological illusion. The feeling of being completely abandoned by the divine is actually the subjective experience of the divine drawing closer than ever before, systematically dismantling the old self to make room for a new mode of perception.

### **The Threshold of Spiritual Ecstasy and Mystical Union**

The ultimate resolution of the dark night is the transition from an agonizing vacuum to a state of radiant, unitive consciousness. Once the crucible has completed its work, the nature of the mystical experience shifts dramatically. Because the intellect can no longer analyze and the will can no longer grasp, the mystic is forced into a state of absolute, passive receptivity. Having abandoned by all self directed effort, the soul becomes an open vessel. It is at this threshold that spiritual ecstasy rapture occurs. The boundary between the subjective self and the objective divine dissolves. However, the ecstasy that follows the dark night is fundamentally different from the emotional highs of the early spiritual journey. Early ecstasies are temporary and often overwhelm the physical body because the human framework is still unrefined.

The ecstasy achieved after passing through the dark night is grounded in a reconstructed consciousness. The soul transition into what mystics call the unitive life or the spiritual marriage. In this state, spiritual ecstasy matures into a stable, permanent reality. The intense highs and lows give way to a profound, unwavering peace. The separate ego does not return; instead, the mystic operates from a place of deep interior oneness, perceiving the sacred in all ordinary things. The void of the night is finally revealed to be identical with the absolute fullness of light.

### **Conclusion**

The analytical journey of the *Dark Night of the Soul* is an absolute structural necessity within the mystical experience. Human consciousness cannot transition directly from ordinary, ego centering awareness to the infinite expanse of divine union without a radical intermediary stage of dismantling. Through the crucible of

absence, the soul is systematically hollowed out. By enduring the painful purging of sensory dependencies and the profound ego death of spiritual desolation. The mystic's faculties are expanded and refined. Ultimately, the dark night proves to be a profound act of grace, it is the dark. Silent threshold through which the separate self must pass to awaken to a boundless enduring spiritual ecstasy.

### **Works Cited**

Cross, John of the. *Dark Night of the Soul*. Edited and translated by E. Allison Peers, from the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, C.D.

"Saint John of the Cross." Franciscan Media,

Cross, John of the. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Includes *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, *The Living Flame of Love*, *Letters*, and *The Minor Works*.