

Darkness and starlight: the meaning of moonlight in music essay examples

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



For as long as people have created works of art to represent themselves and their conceptions of the world around them, the symbolism that the moon offers has provided it with a unique place among natural symbols. The moon earned its place thanks to the deep understanding of ancient peoples and their mythological use of the moon to explain natural and moral phenomena. In music, all of those ancient stories concerning the moon and its place in the collective human psyche are layered atop one another to create a dense, mysterious symbol defined best by the pieces composed to represent it. The best examples of this dense symbolism are found in Beethoven's popularly attributed Moonlight Sonata, Debussy's *Clair De Lune* and Mancini's *Moon River*.

Determining the symbolism of the moon in these very different pieces of music requires a degree of knowledge on the mythological background of the moon in western cultures. This background has been given thousands of years to ferment as a subconscious substrate of understanding within the artists' mind. Each of the artists mentioned above identified the moon as a vehicle for their most mysterious feelings, due to its connection with the night, with dreams, with the cyclic nature of its revolution around the earth, and due to its contrast with the related symbols of day and light.

Understanding the title of Ludwig Van Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata requires a nuanced historical perspective. It should be noted that Beethoven himself gave his most famous sonata a different name, which, translated from the original Italian, means, "Sonata Almost In The Manner Of A Fantasy". The name by which this work is known now was attributed to it by a contemporary music critic named Ludwig Rellstab five years after

Beethoven's death. This raises a number of important questions about the nature of musical symbolism and the importance of the author's implication in managing those symbols. Many critics have objected to the use of the name "Moonlight Sonata" because of its apparent lack of connection to the creator's original intentions.

The fact, however, that the original name has lapsed into obscurity and has been dominated by the symbol of moonlight, represented by the new name, shows that the public perception of the validity of this symbol is held powerfully enough such that, for all effective purposes, Beethoven's intentions regarding the matter are largely irrelevant. This is a classic example of unintentional, and possibly unconscious, symbol allocation. The place of the moon within the context of the piece of music in question is largely accepted by modern critics, by virtue of the fact that the name remained relevant throughout history. With few exceptions, music historians tend to agree that, had the symbol not been fitting and in-line with Beethoven's intentions regarding the piece of music in question, the name would have never been adopted by the general population with so much success.

Beethoven's understanding of moonlight may have been accidentally attributed, but the strength of the symbol remains as a testament to his powerful emotive force as a composer. For Beethoven, moonlight is defined as a single ray of light standing out through the darkness, symbolized in his first movement by the stray G# that forms the most memorable and touching element of the entire piece. By the time the listener arrives at the tumultuous third movement, the light has been shattered and the musical

focus has given way to the great waves of emotion that it is illuminating. Another piece of music that can attribute allocated symbols to its success - including that of the moon - is Debussy's *Clair De Lune*. This piece, published in 1905, uses a famous poem of the same name as the foundation of its moon-relayed imagery. Here, unlike in Beethoven's piece, the symbol is inarguably lifted from the emotional imagery of the poem by Paul Verlaine and, consciously so, by the composer. Understanding the place that the moon occupies within the context of Debussy's piece requires a further understanding of the imagery used in the poem and offers unique insight into the mind of the composer.

In Verlaine's *Clair De Lune*, moonlight is used near the end of the poem to describe the self-deceiving nature of a group of masked partygoers and by extension of human nature in general. They are described first as happy, then as harboring a secret sadness, and, then, as using the vitality of their emotions to reach an enlightened, hypersensitive state of tranquil harmony with their unique nature. That essential vitality is described using moonlight as a symbol due to its dual nature, both as a source of light in the darkness of the night and as the harbinger of night itself. This dual nature is what gives it the unique ability to effectively represent the dual nature of the human condition in its combination of animalistic and culturally enlightened overtones.

This symbol is carried over in Debussy's *Clair De Lune* by its transformative musical statement regarding silence, which represents darkness in the piece. Debussy uses silence as a symbolic effect in the opening measures of the piece, as well as throughout its course. At each point, when the preceding

silence is broken by two parallel melodic lines separated by thirds, these lines are meant to convey the sense of moonlight falling onto the faces of the revelers in a captured moment of slow, mesmerizing dance. The scene then breaks and the light is splashed around the fountains and gardens of the estate mentioned in Verlaine's poem in what Morrison calls a, " triumph of Impressionism through the ability to convey the content of a visual scene through music." (Morrison 85).

Debussy's moonlight takes the form of a specific melodic motif that is carried throughout the short movement and can be immediately identified as always succeeding silence in time. Each time that the interpretation of the musical piece suddenly stops with a flagged note, the sound left to ring out like an image fading slowly into the abyss, it is to be understood by the listener as the onset of darkness. That darkness is then pierced yet again by the moonlight theme. Once the theme is repeated sufficiently, it gives way to a reverse crescendo that, surprisingly, instead of reaching an explosive climax, gives way to the dreamy rumbling of bass tones " left sustained longingly over the vanishing memory of the previous flurry of activity" (Strange 21). It is here that Debussy's perception of moonlight is given its most crucial form and its place as the revealer of hidden things made clear.

Moon River, as written by Henry Mancini and made famous by Andy Williams, is a piece of music with an entirely different scope on the symbolism of the moon. This difference, however, finds connective tissue in common with Beethoven's, as well as Debussy's use of the moon as a symbol. Mancini was a premier songwriter for the classic age of Hollywood, and Moon River remains one of his most loved tunes, combining an easy waltz beat with

longing lyrics tinged with hope at the appearance of the moon reflected in the water of a river. Here, the moon is directly called both a dream-maker and a heart-breaker in the lyrics, for reasons that, Mancini would agree, are not too far off from Debussy's original intention.

Creating a dream-maker out of the moon is not at all a difficult stretch of the imagination. In many ancient societies, the moon was literally understood to be the manifestation of a god responsible for night, and the place of moonlight as the prevailing illumination offered in dreams has already been alluded to in Debussy's work through his influence from Paul Verlaine. By giving the moon this power specifically, it is being endowed with the capability to produce, in people, a combination of their most powerful feelings as they are so often expressed, often by contradictory means, in dreams. The moon as a dream-maker is a symbol that has been used in countless creation myths from prehistory and onwards and that is here immortalized in song by the creative penning of a lovelorn traveler's ode to the satellite. When the lyrics mention that both the river and the song's narrator are searching for the same rainbow's end, they again tie the symbol of light to the nature of human discovery and yearning- although in this case it is a different light.

The moonlight, in Mancini's case, is identified with human yearning, as well as with the everyman's leap into the unknown. The rainbow is used to symbolize the goals that the combination of our innate human nature and our choices lead us to form desires for, and both forms of light are given unique essence in their ability to bring listeners to terms with their own previously ignored sense of freedom and simple humanity. However,

Mancini's perception of the moon differs largely from its similarities to Debussy's when the value of the moon as a heart-breaker is concerned. Here, the songwriter has much more in common with Beethoven, whose emotive third movement is, usually, considered a heart-wrenching stab towards the onset of his deafness. Through Mancini's application of the symbol, the moon is given a sense of design as representing the unknown and being the cause not just of dreams, but also of shadow itself. That shadow represents uncertainty, and the use of moonlight in the sense of heartbreak can be found most validly in the romantic connotations of the scenes it suggests. The moon is a heartbreaker because of the promises that moonlight makes without having the power to fully show the truth and to allow the narrator of the song to "chase their dreams and loves with certainty" (Bordwell 160).

The application of these different senses of moonlight in their various poetic and artistically symbolic ways is key to gaining a deeper connection with the archetype of the moon symbol itself. Through these three examples, it is possible to see that the unconsciously attributed rays of moonlight stemming from what Berlioz called Beethoven's "lamentation notes" (Hatten 12) are only a single face to the larger whole of the moon's place in our human psyche. Debussy's obsession with defining the borders between primitivism and enlightenment through the use of moonlight as a mystical double entendre only deepens the subversive qualities of the moon's light as a symbol. Mancini, in turn, combines the two influences into a radio-friendly lovelorn travel song in the style of the Tin Pan Alley greats that came before him and builds yet an additional layer of meaning that the modern society's

understanding of the symbolism of the moon must now assimilate.

Through these multitudes of layers and meanings, the average music listener is not given enough information to form the full picture of what the symbolism really means in a purely logical sense. Instead, having been surrounded by these and other symbolic representations of the power of moonlight, the listener is simply made to feel the great weight of their ancestor's symbolism growing through them and delivering emotive content that they might not otherwise ever get from anywhere else. The human mechanism for emotion, especially in relation to music, is one that derives greater significance and power from additional meaning, even from those meanings not implicitly understood by the individual in question. Since the listener need not understand the power of moonlight as a symbol, they are simply subjected to its force and left to bask in the heightened sublime that the music written of it inspires in them and in others.

Works cited

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