Night, Sleep, Mental States: the dim boundary between Art and Science

(Neurology and the Arts)

Liborio Parrino[1]

[1] Mario Giovanni Terzano Interdepartmental Centre for Sleep Medicine, University of Parma, Parma, Italy; Sleep Disorders Centre, Department of Medicine and Surgery, Parma University Hospital, Parma, Italy

Corresponding Author:

Liborio Parrino

E-mail address: liborio.parrino@unipr.it

Abstract

The essay explores the relationship between sleep, the night, art, and science, demonstrating how literature, philosophy, theater, cinema, and popular culture have often anticipated themes that sleep medicine would only come to study in the modern era. The night emerges as a privileged space in which consciousness, desire, fear, imagination, and behavior are transformed, challenging the boundaries between reality and dreams. Through figures such as Prometheus, Frankenstein, and Eve in Paradise Lost, the text links sleep to themes of knowledge, creation, and transformation. In many literary works, the night becomes a setting where hidden desires (as in Madame Bovary) or feelings of guilt (as in Macbeth) manifest, or where complex behaviors occur in the absence of full awareness—such as the sleepwalking depicted by Thomas Hardy and Vincenzo Bellini. These portrayals anticipate issues that are central to contemporary sleep medicine, ranging from parasomnias to the moral and legal responsibility for actions taken during sleep. Other authors, such as Dickens, illustrate how insomnia can alter one's perception of the world, while symbolic figures like Dracula embody an inversion of the day-night rhythm. Contemporary literature—for instance, Jonathan Coe's The House of Sleep—incorporates actual clinical phenomena, such as narcolepsy and cataplexy. The essay further highlights the role of culture in shaping sleep patterns—from the television-viewing rituals of the past in Italy to today's digital technologies, which contribute to a "polluted night" filled with artificial light, noise, and constant stimuli. Finally, it reflects on the possibility that future artificial intelligence might develop sleep-like processes. In conclusion, sleep is simultaneously a biological phenomenon and a cultural construct: science investigates its mechanisms, while art explores its deeper human meanings.

Keywords: Arts; Artificial intelligence; Dreams; Literature; Night; Sleepwalking

Introduction

Night has always occupied an ambiguous position in human culture. It is the natural domain of sleep and rest, but also of dreams, desire, fear, altered behaviour, secrecy, transgression, and imagination. Long before sleep became the object of modern physiological and neurological investigation, literature and the arts had already explored many of the phenomena that would later attract scientific attention (Figure 1).

The history of sleep can therefore be approached not only through medicine but also through the images and narratives that cultures have constructed around the night. Writers, dramatists, composers, filmmakers, and painters repeatedly anticipated questions that sleep medicine would eventually formulate in clinical and physiological terms. What happens to consciousness during sleep? How does waking experience enter dreams? Can complex behaviour continue without ordinary awareness? What is the relationship between emotion and sleep? Where does the boundary lie between physiological sleep, sleep disorder, imagination, and simulation?

Nocturnal fantasy provides an especially productive meeting point between science and art. Across different historical periods, night has served as a privileged setting in which ordinary rules appear to weaken, consciousness changes its configuration, and the boundaries between nature and culture become particularly visible.

Figure 1. Alberto Martini, Allegoria del genio della poesia e dell'arte (1911).

The Dawn of Humanity: Night, Knowledge, and Prometheus

A striking modern example is Arthur C. Clarke's (1917–2008) *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the film developed alongside it by Stanley Kubrick (1928–1999).

The relationship between the two works is sometimes simplified. Clarke's novel was not originally entitled *The Sentinel*. Rather, Clarke had written the short story "The Sentinel" in 1948, first publishing it in 1951; it was one of several earlier stories that contributed to the development of *2001*. The novel and film were subsequently developed concurrently through the collaboration between Clarke and Kubrick.

In Clarke's account of prehistoric humanity, the transition represented by the mysterious monolith is associated symbolically with night and dawn. Moon-Watcher and his threatened group of hominids inhabit an environment marked by hunger, drought, and vulnerability. The arrival of the monolith introduces an external force that changes their relationship with the world. In Kubrick's celebrated "Dawn of Man" sequence, the encounter culminates in an evolutionary and technological leap. The monolith can therefore be read metaphorically as a modern Promethean object: an intervention that gives early humanity access to a new form of knowledge and power.

That association leads backwards to the ancient myth of Prometheus who gives fire to humankind and is punished by Zeus. In *Prometheus Bound*, traditionally attributed to Aeschylus (c. 525/524–c. 456/455 BCE). Prometheus is chained and subjected to the repeated devouring of his regenerating liver by an eagle. The Promethean myth established one of the enduring themes of Western culture: knowledge as both emancipation and danger. Humanity acquires power by crossing a boundary, but such progress carries consequences. Knowledge illuminates, but illumination itself can be dangerous.

Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus

This theme reappears explicitly in Mary Shelley's (1797–1851) *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, first published in 1818. The subtitle is fundamental. Victor Frankenstein is a modern Prometheus because he attempts to acquire and exercise a power previously associated with the divine: the creation of life. Night again marks the decisive threshold. Frankenstein recalls bringing his creature to life on a "dreary night of November." Yet the spectacular lightning strike and elaborate electrical machinery familiar with later cinematic adaptations should not be projected backwards onto Mary Shelley's novel, who deliberately leaves the precise mechanism by which Frankenstein animates the creature obscure.

The scientific context nevertheless matters. Shelley wrote at a time of intense interest in electricity, galvanism, vitalism, and the relationship between living and non-living matters. Luigi Galvani (1737–1798) had investigated what he interpreted as animal electricity, while Alessandro Volta (1745–1827) developed a competing interpretation of electrical phenomena and constructed the voltaic pile. Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini (1762–1834) further contributed to the public fascination with galvanism through dramatic demonstrations of electrical stimulation applied to animal and human bodies. Such experiments formed part of the broader scientific and cultural environment in which speculation concerning the animation of apparently lifeless matter became increasingly imaginable.

Night returns at another decisive moment in the novel. The creature has warned Victor that he will be with him on his wedding night. (chapter 20):

The monster saw my determination in my face and gnashed his teeth in the impotence of anger. "Shall each man," cried he, "find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone? I had feelings of affection, and they were requited by detestation and scorn. Man! You may hate, but beware! Your hours will pass in dread and misery, and soon the bolt will fall which must ravish from you your happiness forever. Are you to be happy while I grovel in the intensity of my wretchedness? You can blast my other passions, but revenge remains—revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food! I may die, but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery. Beware, for I am fearless and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom. Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict."
"Devil, cease; and do not poison the air with these sounds of malice. I have declared my resolution to you, and I am no coward to bend beneath words. Leave me; I am inexorable."
"It is well. I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night."

Victor assumes that he himself is the intended victim; instead, the creature murders Elizabeth. Later visual adaptations have sometimes altered the scene dramatically. In Shelley's novel, Elizabeth is strangled. The creature does not tear her heart from her chest. The nocturnal setting nevertheless reinforces Shelley's central themes: creation, solitude, desire for companionship, responsibility, and the destructive consequences of refusing the creature participation in human affection. The modern Prometheus has succeeded in creating life but has failed to assume responsibility for the life he created.

Sleep, Creation, and Eve in *Paradise Lost*

The question of companionship links *Frankenstein* directly to John Milton's (1608–1674) *Paradise Lost*, a work that profoundly influenced Shelley.

The biblical principle that “it is not good that the man should be alone” originates in *Genesis*, but Milton gives the creation of Eve an elaborate poetic form. Adam recounts entering a sleep-like state while the Creator forms Eve from his side. Sleep becomes the interval in which one form of human existence is transformed into another. The imagery is particularly suggestive because Adam is passive during the act of creation. He closes his eyes and awakens to discover companionship. Sleep is therefore not represented merely as an absence of consciousness: it becomes a condition during which transformation can occur beyond the subject's direct control. Eve's dreams acquire an equally important function. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan first approaches Eve while she sleeps, before the later waking temptation involving the serpent. The dream anticipates the transgression that will subsequently occur.

The relationship between dream and action is psychologically sophisticated. The dream does not simply predict the future; it becomes a space in which temptation can first be imagined. Nocturnal experience and waking action are therefore connected without being identical. In Milton's poetry nocturnal mental life is portrayed as capable of reorganizing desires, fears, images, memories, and conflicts that continue to matter after awakening.

This literary conception can be placed, more broadly and metaphorically, beside the principle associated with Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) that nature does not break its laws. Leonardo

was not referring specifically to sleep, but the maxim introduces a fundamental question: to what extent is sleep itself one of nature's rules?

From a modern biological perspective, sleep and sleep-like states are extraordinarily widespread across the animal kingdom. It would be too strong to claim that every living organism sleeps in the neurological sense, but the evolutionary persistence of sleep suggests that it represents a fundamental biological phenomenon rather than a passive interruption of life.

Night, Desire, and *Madame Bovary*

Night also creates a protected space for desires that cannot easily be expressed during the day. In Gustave Flaubert's (1821–1880) *Madame Bovary*, Emma Bovary's nocturnal meetings with Rodolphe Boulanger exemplify this use of darkness. Emma experiences her marriage to Charles Bovary as monotonous and emotionally impoverished. Her romantic imagination demands intensity, passion, novelty, and transformation. Her affair with Rodolphe offers a temporary escape. He visits her secretly, and darkness allows Emma to cross boundaries that the social order of daytime life would make more visible. Such scenes help explain why *Madame Bovary* became culturally explosive. Flaubert was prosecuted for offences against public morality following the novel's serialization. He was acquitted in 1857, the same year in which the novel appeared in book form. Yet Emma's repeated attempts to obtain fulfilment through romantic passion fail. Rodolphe ultimately abandons her, while her later relationship with Léon similarly fails to provide the imagined existence she seeks. Emma eventually deliberately swallows arsenic and dies after a prolonged and agonizing poisoning, against a background of emotional desperation and catastrophic financial debt. The act is deliberate, although its physical consequences unfold painfully over time.

Night in Flaubert therefore becomes both liberation and concealment. It gives Emma temporary access to a life beyond domestic routine, but it cannot resolve the conflict between fantasy and reality.

Macbeth: Guilt That Destroys Sleep

In William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) *Macbeth*, sleep takes on a profoundly different meaning. After murdering King Duncan, Macbeth hears the terrifying proclamation that he has "murdered sleep." Sleep represents innocence, restoration, vulnerability, and the possibility of mental peace. By killing Duncan, Macbeth has not merely committed a political crime; he has damaged his own relationship with sleep.

Lady Macbeth initially appears psychologically more resilient. She has encouraged Macbeth to commit the murder and attempts to suppress its emotional consequences. By Act V, however, the relationship between waking control and nocturnal behaviour has been reversed. Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep, repeatedly rubbing her hands as though attempting to remove blood that is no longer physically present. Her sleepwalking makes visible what waking consciousness has failed to master.

Shakespeare thereby transforms somnambulism into a dramatic representation of divided consciousness. Behaviour emerges during an altered state, and concealed guilt becomes

externally observable. What cannot be acknowledged during ordinary waking life returns during the night.

Lady Macbeth's death occurs offstage and is strongly implied to be self-inflicted, although Shakespeare never stages the act itself. Sleep, which earlier represented restoration and innocence, has become a stage upon which guilt continues to act.

Sleepwalking and the Boundary Between Sleep and Action

Few literary episodes capture the disturbing ambiguity of sleepwalking more vividly than Thomas Hardy's (1840–1928) *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Angel Clare, Tess's husband, rises while asleep, takes Tess in his arms, and carries her out of the house. Still asleep, he crosses a narrow footbridge over water and eventually places her in an empty stone coffin among the ruins of an abbey. Tess remains awake throughout the episode. Her dilemma is striking: should she wake him and risk startling him while they are in danger, or remain silent and allow the episode to continue?

Angel eventually crosses safely and places Tess in the stone coffin. Hardy thereby brings sleep into proximity with death: the sleeping man carries the conscious woman toward a symbolic grave. The traditional association between Hypnos and Thanatos—sleep and death—is transformed into narrative action. The scene is also remarkable because the sleeper performs coordinated, meaningful, and physically demanding behaviour while lacking ordinary waking awareness.

From the perspective of modern sleep medicine, Hardy's episode provides an unusually vivid literary representation of one of the central paradoxes of parasomnia: complex behaviour can coexist with markedly altered consciousness.

Sleepwalking became the central mechanism of an entire operatic plot in Vincenzo Bellini's (1801–1835) *La sonnambula*, with a libretto by Felice Romani (1788–1865). Amina is engaged to Elvino but is discovered in the room of Count Rodolfo after entering it while sleepwalking. The apparent evidence of infidelity threatens marriage. Amina already suffers from sleepwalking, a condition of which she herself is completely unaware. The causal sequence is crucial. It is not the shock of an accusation that triggers her episodes. Rather, her sleepwalking leads to false accusation.

Her innocence is ultimately demonstrated when she is observed sleepwalking again, this time in circumstances that make the nature of her behaviour unmistakable. Bellini and Romani thus make altered consciousness the solution to a problem of moral responsibility.

The opera developed from earlier French theatrical treatments of somnambulism and made sleepwalking its central dramatic mechanism. From a medico-cultural perspective, *La sonnambula* raises a remarkably persistent question: should behaviour performed during sleep be interpreted according to the moral and legal categories applied to waking action? The problem would later become relevant not merely to literature and theatre but also to medicine and forensic practice.

Simulation, Consciousness, and the Comic Sleepwalker

Popular culture has repeatedly exploited the uncertainty surrounding sleepwalking for comic purposes. The Italian actor Totò, the stage name of Antonio de Curtis (1898–1967), repeatedly exploited states of apparent confusion, altered awareness, and deliberate simulation as humorous devices. Such representations derive their effectiveness from uncertainty: is the character genuinely unaware of what is happening, or is he consciously performing? Behind the comedy lies a genuine medico-legal problem: distinguishing authentic parasomnia from simulated behaviour.

In disorders of arousal, consciousness and responsiveness may be variably impaired. Episodes can involve incomplete awakening, reduced responsiveness to the environment, impaired subsequent recall, and relatively complex motor behaviour. A sleepwalker therefore cannot be adequately described through a simple binary opposition between "conscious" and "unconscious." The simulator, by contrast, deliberately exploits uncertainty about what a sleeping person can or cannot do.

The distinction can become medically and legally important when complex behaviour occurring during an alleged state of sleep has consequences for the individual or for others. Appearance alone cannot always establish the level of awareness or intentionality underlying an action.

Charles Dickens and the Nocturnal City

Charles Dickens (1812–1870) approached the night from another direction. In his essay "Night Walks," first published on July 21, 1860, and later collected in *The Uncommercial Traveler*, Dickens described a period of temporary inability to sleep during which he walked for hours through London. His insomnia became a method of observation. Walking through London at night brought him into contact with spaces, people, institutions, and social conditions that differed from those visible during ordinary daytime life. The nocturnal city became a laboratory of human observation. This fits remarkably well with Dickens's wider literary practice. His fiction repeatedly reveals marginal figures, poverty, homelessness, institutional life, loneliness, and the social geography of London.

It is tempting to interpret Dickens's nocturnal restlessness retrospectively in neurological terms. The fact that walking accompanied or relieved his inability to remain at rest might invite comparisons with restless legs syndrome or a circadian disorder. The available historical evidence is insufficient to establish either condition. The safer conclusion is also the more interesting one historically: sleeplessness altered Dickens's behaviour, and that altered behaviour changed what he was able to observe. Night provided access to another London.

Dracula and the Inversion of Day and Night

Few fictional figures embody nocturnality as completely as Count Dracula. Bram Stoker's (1847–1912) *Dracula* constructs vampirism around a profound asymmetry between night and day. Dracula is most powerful and most characteristically active at night, while daylight restricts his supernatural capacities without rendering him completely inactive or destroying him. This distinction is important. The now-familiar idea that sunlight necessarily destroys a vampire should not be projected directly onto Stoker's novel. The association between sunlight and the vampire's destruction became particularly influential through later cinematic traditions.

In Francis Ford Coppola's (b. 1939) 1992 film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, the erotic dimension of nocturnal vampirism is particularly explicit, notably in the representation of Dracula's brides and Jonathan Harker.

From the perspective of sleep medicine, it is tempting to describe Dracula humorously as displaying an inversion of ordinary human circadian organization. Yet this should remain an analogy rather than a diagnosis. Dracula is not a patient with a circadian rhythm sleep-wake disorder; his nocturnality belongs to the biological mythology of the vampire. The same caution applies to interpreting nocturnal vampiric feeding as a form of night-eating syndrome or compulsive nocturnal eating.

What Dracula reveals particularly clearly is the cultural power of circadian inversion. Human beings tend to associate daylight with ordinary social life and night with vulnerability, predation, sexuality, secrecy, and altered rules. The vampire becomes disturbing partly because it inhabits the temporal world according to an organization that reverses ordinary human rules and expectations. In the novel, the nonconformist nature of vampirism is reinforced by Dracula's deranged, fanatically devoted servant R.M. Renfield, the zoophagous inmate at the lunatic asylum.

Narcolepsy in Jonathan Coe's *The House of Sleep*

The relationship between literature and clinical sleep medicine becomes much more direct in *The House of Sleep* by Jonathan Coe (b. 1961), published in 1997. The novel is deeply preoccupied with sleep, sleeplessness, dreams, and altered states. One of its characters, Sarah, has narcolepsy. The appropriate modern terminology for her condition would be *narcolepsy with cataplexy*, broadly corresponding to what is now classified as narcolepsy type 1.

Sarah describes one of the defining characteristics of cataplexy: intense emotion, particularly laughter, can cause a sudden loss of muscle tone while consciousness is preserved. This corresponds closely to the clinical phenomenon. Cataplexy consists of brief episodes of partial or complete loss of muscle tone, characteristically triggered by strong emotions, particularly positive emotions such as laughter.

Narcolepsy overcomes the popular idea of simply “sleeping too much.” Disrupted nocturnal sleep, repeated awakenings, and poor sleep continuity are well-recognized features of the disorder together with cataplexy, sleep paralysis and vivid dream-like hallucinations.

Literature here performs a somewhat different function from that seen in the earlier examples. Coe is not merely using sleep as a metaphor. Recognizable clinical phenomena become part of the architecture of the novel and of the identities and relationships of its characters.

Television and the Social History of Bedtime

Night is not determined by biology alone. Social practices and technologies continually reshape the sleep-wake schedule. Italian television provides a particularly revealing example. For two decades, *Carosello* structured the evening rhythm of Italian households. Broadcasted by RAI from February 3, 1957, to January 1, 1977, it became so closely associated with children's bedtime that the expression *“a letto dopo Carosello”*—“to bed after Carosello”—entered Italian collective memory. Television therefore participated in the social regulation of bedtime.

A collective ritual became a temporal signal around which the evening routine of an entire nation was organized.

In 1985, Renzo Arbore (b. 1937) and his collaborators created *Quelli della notte*, a very different television show. Broadcasted by Rai 2 from April 29 to June 14, 1985, the programme occupied late-night lineup. Rather than signaling that the day was over, it gave viewers a reason to remain awake. It became a cult phenomenon and contributed to changing the language and atmosphere of Italian television.

The comparison between *Carosello* and *Quelli della notte* illustrates a broader historical process. Bedtime is biological, but it is also cultural. Broadcasting schedules, artificial lighting, work routines, entertainment, and later digital media all modify the social timing of sleep. Sleep is continually negotiated between nature and culture.

Artificial Intelligence: Will Machines Sleep?

The relationship between sleep and culture now leads to a question that once belonged almost entirely to science fiction: will artificial intelligence ever sleep? Science fiction explored related questions long before contemporary AI. Philip K. Dick (1928–1982) imagined artificial beings whose inner experiences challenge the distinction between human and machine, most famously in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Isaac Asimov (1920–1992) similarly explored the behavioural and ethical status of intelligent machines across his robot stories.

Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* provides another version of the problem through HAL 9000. The question “Do machines dream?” is therefore not simply technological. It forces us to ask what sleep and dreaming actually are. If sleep is fundamentally tied to biological homeostasis, metabolic regulation, synaptic processes, memory consolidation, and circadian physiology, then present-day artificial systems do not sleep in the human neurological sense.

Future artificial agents might nevertheless develop processes that are functionally analogous to certain components of sleep, for example, periods of reduced external interaction devoted to memory reorganization, internal processing, maintenance, or learning. Such processes would not by themselves constitute biological sleep, but they might make analogies between artificial and biological systems conceptually interesting.

Whether artificial systems could genuinely *experience* dreams is a much deeper question involving consciousness and subjective experience. At present, it cannot be answered scientifically. Science fiction remains valuable precisely because it allows such questions to be formulated before science possesses the means to resolve them.

Plato and the Psychology of Sleep

The relationship between waking life and nocturnal experience was already a philosophical problem in antiquity. In Book IX of the *Republic*, Plato (c. 428/427–c. 348/347 BCE) considers what happens when a person goes to sleep. When reason is inactive and the appetitive part of the soul is uncontrolled, forbidden impulses may emerge in dreams. By contrast, a person who prepares for sleep by activating and nourishing the rational part of the soul while calming the appetitive and spirited elements is more likely to experience ordered dreams and, in Plato's account, may even approach truth more closely. It would be anachronistic to transform Plato

into a sleep physician. Yet the psychological intuition remains striking. The mental state with which one approaches sleep can influence nocturnal experience.

Modern sleep science approaches the issue from a more prudential perspective. Emotional arousal, stress, prior waking experience, environmental conditions, and behaviour before bedtime can indeed influence subsequent sleep quality and organization. However, the relationship between waking experience and the specific content of dreams is unpredictable and thus cannot be treated as mechanically deterministic. Nevertheless, the broader intuition remains recognizable: Night does not begin psychologically from zero.

The Polluted Night

This observation leads naturally to a contemporary problem. Modern human sleep takes place in an environment profoundly altered by technology and culture. Artificial light extends daytime into the night. Environmental noise can fragment sleep. Shift work and irregular schedules can disrupt circadian organization. Digital devices and entertainment compete with bedtime. Pain, medication, psychological stress, eating patterns, and environmental conditions can all affect sleep quality and timing. In this sense, the modern night may be described metaphorically as a *polluted night*.

The struggle between sleep and wakefulness is no longer determined solely by sunrise and sunset. It takes place within an environment increasingly capable of sustaining wakefulness beyond the natural light-dark cycle. The cultural trajectory from Prometheus to Frankenstein, from Eve's dream to Emma Bovary's nocturnal desire, from Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking to Dickens's insomnia, and from Dracula to television and artificial intelligence therefore converges on a very contemporary question: What kind of night are human beings constructing for themselves?

Art Before Science

Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) once observed: “Everything of importance has been said before by somebody who did not discover it.” Whitehead made this observation in his 1916 presidential address to the Mathematical Association, in the context of a broader reflection on discovery and the history of ideas. The remark captures particularly well the relationship between artistic intuition and scientific investigation.

Artists frequently describe phenomena before science provides them with mechanisms, classifications, or experimental evidence. Their observations are not scientific discoveries in themselves: they are not obtained through controlled investigation and cannot substitute for empirical verification. Yet literature and art can identify experiences worth investigating.

Thomas Hardy represented complex sleepwalking before modern polysomnography. Shakespeare dramatized altered nocturnal behaviour and divided consciousness. Dickens transformed insomnia into urban observation. Jonathan Coe incorporated narcolepsy and cataplexy into fiction. Science fiction asked whether artificial beings might dream long before artificial intelligence became part of everyday technological life.

Science subsequently approaches such phenomena through observation, measurement, experimentation, and critical testing. Falsifiability, most famously associated with Karl Popper

(1902–1994), became one influential twentieth-century formulation of how scientific hypotheses might be distinguished by their openness to empirical refutation. But the questions science asks do not arise in an intellectual vacuum. Art can precede measurement by recognizing a phenomenon before science knows how to measure it.

Conclusion

The history of sleep is also a history of the night. Across mythology, literature, opera, cinema, television, philosophy, and science, night repeatedly becomes the setting in which ordinary rules are suspended or reorganized. Prometheus brings forbidden knowledge; Frankenstein creates life; Eve dreams of transgression; Emma Bovary pursues desire; Lady Macbeth reveals guilt through sleepwalking; Angel Clare performs complex acts without ordinary waking awareness; Amina's somnambulism challenges assumptions about moral responsibility; Dickens turns insomnia into observation; Dracula reverses ordinary expectations concerning day and night; Jonathan Coe transforms narcolepsy into literary experience and Plato anticipates suggestions for sleep hygiene.

Modern sleep medicine provides physiological and neurobiological frameworks for phenomena that earlier cultures described and interpreted through medical, philosophical, religious, and artistic models. Those earlier representations remain valuable because sleep has always been an intimate friend of humanity and reveal how deeply it is embedded in questions of consciousness, identity, responsibility, desire, memory, and social organization.

The relationship is therefore not one in which science simply replaces art. The two approach human experience through different methods. Science seeks mechanisms, evidence, reproducibility, and explanation; art can capture the subjective, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of experiences that may resist immediate measurement.

Sleep is a biological necessity, but the meanings attributed to sleep, dreams, insomnia, and the night are also historical and cultural. The continuing tension between these two dimensions—nature and culture, physiology and imagination—may be the most enduring thread connecting the art of sleep with the science of sleep.

Specific Statements

Funding: The author received no specific funding for this work.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; internally peer reviewed. Submitted: June 10, 206. Received in revised form: September 8, 2026. Accepted: September 8, 2026.

Disclaimer

The content provided on The Charcot Journal website is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition. Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read on this site. The Charcot Journal and its contributors do not accept any responsibility for any loss which may arise from reliance on information contained on this site.

Terms and Conditions

Unless otherwise stated, all content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). You may share the content for non-commercial purposes, provided thar (a) proper attribution is given to the original authors and The Charcot Journal; (b) the content is not modified or adapted in any way. Commercial use and the creation of derivative works are not permitted without prior written permission from the copyright holder. Authors retain full copyright and may reuse their own work in any form, including for commercial purposes. The website may contain links to third-party websites. We are not responsible for the content or practices of these external sites. We reserve the right to update or modify these terms at any time without prior notice.