

The Concept Of "Soul" in the Poems and Aphorisms of Hildegard Von Bingen

Hildegard Von Bingen'in Şiirleri ve Aforizmalarında "Ruh" Kavramı

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Öz

Bu çalışma, orta çağ Alman yazarlarından Hildegard von Bingen'in eserlerinde ruh kavramını incelemektedir. Hildegard'ın ilahiyat ve mistik alanındaki eserleri, Alman edebiyatı ve Hristiyan mistisizmi üzerinde önemli bir etkiye sahip olup Alman edebiyat tarihi açısından da kayda değer bir yere sahiptir. Çalışma, Hildegard'ın ruh kavramını ele alış biçimini ve ruhun ilahi tinsellik ile insanın manevi gelişimi arasındaki ilişkisini, yazarın en önemli şiirlerinden biri ve on beş aforizması üzerinden analiz etmektedir. Araştırma, Hildegard'ın ruhun yolculuğunu ve dönüşümünü, ayrıca onun ilahi olana bağlantısını betimlemek için kullandığı sembolik ve metaforik dili derinlemesine incelemektedir. Analiz, metinlerdeki çok katmanlı anlamları ortaya çıkarmayı ve bunları tarihsel, kültürel, edebi ve teolojik bağlamda yorumlamayı hedefleyen hermenötik bir yöntemle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Seçilen metinlerin ayrıntılı bir analizi yoluyla, bu çalışma Hildegard'ın ruh hakkındaki görüşlerini şekillendiren temel teolojik ve felsefi temaları açığa çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu araştırma, Hildegard'ın mistik teolojisinin orta çağ ruhaniyeti ve edebiyatı üzerindeki etkisini derinlemesine anlamaya katkı sağlamaktadır. Elde edilen sonuçlar, onun yenilikçi ruhani kavrayışlarının, orta çağ dini düşüncesi ve bu düşüncenin yazıya dökülme süreci bağlamında özgün bir perspektif sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta çağ Alman Şiiri, Kadın Yazarlar, Filoloji, Mistisizm, Ruh.

Abstract

This study explores the conception of the soul in the works of Hildegard von Bingen, a German medieval female author whose theological and mystical writing have significantly impacted German Literature and Christian mysticism. By analysing one of her most known poems and fourteen aphorisms, this paper examines Hildegard's unique portrayal of the soul and its relationship to divine knowledge and spiritual growth. The research delves into the symbolic and metaphorical language Hildegard employs to describe the soul's journey, transformation, and its connection with the divine. The analysis is rooted in hermeneutics, a method focused on uncovering layered meanings in texts and interpreting them within historical, cultural, and theological contexts. Through such an analysis of selected texts, the study aims to uncover the underlying theological and philosophical themes that inform her views on the soul. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of Hildegard's mystical theology and her influence on medieval spiritual literature. The findings highlight how her innovative spiritual insights offer a distinct perspective within the broader context of medieval religious thought.

Keywords: Medieval Poems, Female Writers, Philology, Mysticism, Spirituality.

Introduction

This article examines the depictions and functions of the soul in a selected poem and 15 aphorisms by Hildegard von Bingen. It analyzes Hildegard's literary portrayal of how the soul acts as a mediator between the heavenly and the earthly, how it influences human life both physically and spiritually, and how it relates to moral principles.

The study applies a hermeneutic method, exploring not only the textual meanings but also the cultural and theological frameworks that shape Hildegard's concept of the soul. Hermeneutics allows for a deeper understanding of the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of her work, emphasizing the dynamic relationship between the soul, nature, and divine wisdom.

The analysis in this article is rooted in hermeneutics, a method concerned with the interpretation of texts, especially those with complex symbolic and philosophical meanings. Hermeneutics involves uncovering the layered meanings in Hildegard's metaphors and understanding the historical, cultural, and theological contexts in which her ideas about the soul developed. By applying this method, the study offers not only a close reading of her poetic and aphoristic work but also situates her thoughts within broader medieval theological discourse.

Understanding Soul in Medieval Literature

Medieval literature engaged deeply with the concept of the soul, which was regarded as the source of wisdom, life, and moral guidance. Hildegard's portrayal of the soul as wind, dew, and rain demonstrates its life-giving and nurturing role. However, instead of repeating these metaphors throughout the text, this analysis emphasizes their theological and ethical implications. For example, wind symbolizes the soul's unseen yet pervasive presence, while dew represents comfort and renewal, mirroring the soul's role in spiritual rejuvenation. Hildegard's synthesis of natural imagery with Christian thought underscores her unique contribution to medieval mysticism. In religious and philosophical texts, the role and nature of the soul were central themes, as Christian doctrine viewed humanity as a unity of body and soul. The soul was perceived as the element connecting humans to the divine, guiding individuals toward a higher, spiritual goal. Particularly in mystical and theological writings, like those of Meister Eckhart and Thomas Aquinas, the soul was seen as a mediator between earthly and divine realms. Often, it was portrayed as a dynamic force, encouraging the pursuit of divine knowledge and truth, while enduring inner conflicts and trials along the way (McGinn, 1986).

"[...] und mit dieser Kraft wirkt die Seele im Nichtsein, und sie folgt hiermit Gott, der im Nichtsein wirkt" (Meister Eckhart, 2023). (And with this power, the soul acts in non-being, and in this, it follows God, who also acts in non-being.)

Although women in the Middle Ages had limited access to education and literacy, some female writers produced works that deeply explored the spiritual and soulful dimensions of human existence. Hildegard of Bingen, for example, described the soul as the core of both human and cosmic life in her theological and scientific texts. She envisioned the soul as part of a vast creation, uniting humanity with nature and the divine (Flanagan, 1998). Other mystics, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, also delved into

the theme of the soul, often through visions that expressed an intense spiritual longing for God and a profound internal exploration of human nature.

"Die gebundene Liebe wohnt in der Seele und steigt über menschliche Sinne und gönnt dem Leib keinen eigenen Willen." (Simon, 1907). (Bound love dwells in the soul and rises above human senses, granting the body no will of its own.)

The primary themes of female writers in the Middle Ages often revolved around spiritual experiences, divine love, and the relationship of the soul with God. Figures like Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete wrote about inner visions and mystical unions, allowing readers to share in their spiritual journeys (Kern, 2011). Other common themes included the challenge of understanding the female soul within the tension between divine and earthly life, with a particular emphasis on inner purification and devotion to God. Their literary works reflected not only personal expressions of faith but also complex theological reflections and a unique female perspective on topics such as sin, redemption, and the transformation of the soul. Here an example written by Marguerite Porete;

"The Soul: Ah, sweetest, pure, divine Love, says this Soul, how sweet is this changing by which I am changed into the thing that I love better than I love myself! And I am so changed that I have therein lost my name for the sake of loving, I who can love so little; and I am changed into that which I love more than myself, that is, into Love, for I love nothing but Love" (Babinsky, 1993).

As can be observed in various literary works of the Middle Ages, the concept of the soul lies at the center of many philosophical and religious debates, particularly in medieval theology, where it is regarded as the source of life, wisdom, and moral guidance (Stammler, 1987).

Hildegard of Bingen, one of the most prominent figures of the Middle Ages, engaged deeply with the concept of the soul and expressed her thoughts in both poems and aphorisms. Her works are characterized by a profound connection between the human soul and nature, as well as by a clear distinction between the spiritual and physical aspects of human existence (Flanagan, 1998).

Definition of Soul in Modern Literature written by female authors

Modern German female authors have interpreted the concept of the soul in diverse and often individual ways, frequently detached from traditional religious ideas and closer to themes of identity, emotionality, and personal depth (Caemmerer, Christiane; Delabar, Walter; Ramm, Elke; Schulz, 1999). Authors like Christa Wolf and Herta Müller, for instance, reframe the soul within a psychological and secular context. Wolf's notion of the *"soul as tangled threads"* (Wolf, 1996, p. 214) resonates with Hildegard's idea of the soul's intricate connection to the cosmos, even though Wolf's interpretation is more secular. These modern perspectives emphasize the soul as a site of personal resilience, echoing Hildegard's depiction of the soul as a nurturing, life-giving force. The term "soul" is often used as a metaphor for the inner life, the self, or the essence of an individual, and is closely linked to themes such as self-discovery, psychological growth, and existential questions.

“Schwer, langsam, aber endgültig habe ich mich von dem Glauben gelöst, dass unsere menschlichen Geschicke an den Gang der Gestirne geknüpft sind. Daß dort Seelen wohnen, ähnlich den unseren, die unser Dasein betrifft, und sei es, indem sie die Fäden, die es halten, mißgünstig verwirren” (Wolf, 1996). (Slowly, reluctantly, but finally, I have freed myself from the belief that our human destinies are bound to the course of the stars. Souls live there, similar to ours which influence our being by spitefully tangling the threads that hold it together.)

Some authors incorporate spiritual aspects, but less in a theological sense. The soul can be depicted as a connection to nature, community, or a form of transcendent consciousness. For instance, Christa Wolf explores the inner realms of her characters, delving into memory and consciousness to uncover layers of identity and the psychological landscapes of East and West German experiences (Dahlke, 2024). Similarly, Herta Müller uses the soul to show the psychological depth of individuals affected by trauma and repression, often depicting an "inner world" where personal and historical narratives intersect (Müller, 2024).

In feminist literature, the soul often serves as a symbol of liberation and self-determination. German authors such as Ingeborg Bachmann and Marlen Haushofer discuss the soul as a deep, authentic force that aligns with a woman's experiences, her intuition, and her personal resistance to social norms (Lennox, 2009). This "soul" becomes a foundation for creativity and resilience against societal pressures and stereotypes.

Authors like Juli Zeh and Charlotte Roche explore the soul in the context of personal development and self-reflection, focusing on themes of authenticity and vulnerability. They often address the soul as a source of personal strength, resilience, and introspection, associating it with concepts of self-worth and psychological endurance (Roche, 2010).

As we understand so far the soul in modern German women's literature frequently serves as a flexible and expansive metaphor, representing the pursuit of authenticity, personal depth, and wholeness - a kind of spiritual space where the individual, history, and culture are intricately connected.

The following will first analyze and interpret the poem titled "Die Seele" by Hildegard von Bingen using the methods of literary-lyrical analysis and hermeneutics.

| <i>Original</i> | <i>English Translation*</i> |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Die Seele</i> | <i>The Soul</i> |
| <i>Die Seele ist wie ein Wind,</i> | <i>The soul is like a wind</i> |
| <i>der über die Kräuter weht,</i> | <i>that blows over the herbs,</i> |

wie der Tau, der über die Wiesen like the dew that drips over the meadows,
träufelt, wie die Regenluft, die wachsen like the rain-filled air

macht. *that makes things grow.*

Desgleichen ströme der Mensch In the same way, let humans
Wohlwollen aus auf alle, die da stream forth kindness upon all
Sehnsucht tragen. *who carry longing.*

Ein Wind sei er, der den Elenden hilft, ein Be like the wind that helps the wretched,

Tau, der die Verlassenen tröstet. *a dew that comforts the forsaken.*

Er sei wie die Regenluft, Be like the rain-filled air that lifts up the weary
die die Ermatteten aufrichtet and fills them with love like the hungry.
und sie mit Liebe erfüllt

wie Hungernde. **translated by Gülru Bayraktar.(1098-1179)*

Hildegard von Bingen¹

¹ Bingen, Hildegard von. Scivias. Hrsg. von Adelgundis Führkötter und Angela Carlevaris, Freiburg: Herder, 1990

Analysis of the Poem

Central Theme of the Poem

The central theme of the poem is the human soul and its role in both the internal and external aspects of life. The poem establishes a connection between nature and human empathy by comparing the soul to natural phenomena such as wind, dew, and rain. By comparing them with the soul, von Bingen calls out for the humans to show kindness and support, especially to those in need and to the weak.

The Construction and the Structure of the Poem

The poem is written in free verse and consists of three stanzas of varying lengths. It has no fixed rhyme scheme or regular meter, which is typical of medieval texts that exhibit less formal rigor compared to classical or more modern poetry. However, the poem maintains a clear structure and rhythmic coherence through parallel structures and repetitions.

The poem is divided into two main sections; The first section describes the soul and its connection to natural phenomena. The second section transfers these natural images to human actions, emphasizing the importance of empathy, support, and compassion.

The Meter (Metrum) of the Poem

The lines are predominantly written in iambic meter, meaning the emphasis falls on the second syllable (xX). However, the meter is not consistently strict. The alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables gives the poem a flowing, natural rhythm, reminiscent of the wind, which serves as a central metaphor in the poem.

“Die Seele ist wie ein Wind” (the soul is like a wind) uses iambic rhythm to mimic the gentle movement of the wind.

Stylistic Devices of the Poem

a) Simile;

“The soul is like a wind,” “like dew,” “like rain-filled air.” These comparisons emphasize the gentle, life-giving qualities of the soul, directly connecting it to nature.

b) Metaphor

Humans are encouraged to be “a wind” that “helps the wretched” and “a dew” that “comforts the forsaken.” These metaphors transfer the concept of human care into images of

nature to highlight the healing power of compassion. Hildegard compares the soul to “wind,” “dew,” and “rain-filled

air.” These natural metaphors symbolize vitality, freshness, and care, underscoring the soul's impact on life and the environment.

In the comparisons, humans themselves are portrayed as “wind,” “dew,” and “rain-filled air” and are encouraged to behave

like the soul. These comparisons present the soul as a source of positive, life-giving energy.

c) Anaphora

Repetition: The use of “wie” (like) in the comparisons and the structure of the poem, where the soul and the human being share similar attributes, enhances the significance of this equivalence between nature and humanity.

d) *Alliteration*: “ströme der Mensch Wohlwollen” (let humans stream forth kindness). The repetition of the “W” sound lends a flowing and harmonious tone to the sentence, complementing the poem's imagery.

In the second stanza, each line begins with “ein,” (a,) which emphasizes the structure and creates an almost liturgical tone. The repetition of this structure reinforces the call to the reader to internalize the soul's benevolence and care.

e) *Parallelism*; “Ein Wind sei er... ein Tau... die Regenluft” (Be a wind... a dew... the rain-filled air). This structure emphasizes the different aspects of human nature modeled after nature itself. The parallelism illustrates that the soul and nature form a harmonious unity that humans should strive to emulate.

f) *Symbolism*;

Wind symbolizes mobility, freedom, and a unifying force that touches and moves people. Dew symbolizes gentle, comforting care, nourishing nature with freshness, just as the soul is meant to nurture humans.

It also symbolizes renewal and rejuvenation, serving as a quiet and gentle source of life that refreshes the earth. Dew can also be seen as a metaphor for comfort and affection and, indirectly, as a symbol for tears.

Rain-filled air represents the ability to impart life and reinvigorate the weary. It symbolizes revival and growth, providing strength and new energy, akin to human love and compassion. Wind represents an invisible yet perceptible force that is ever-present and works gently. It can bring about change but also offer solace.

g) *Imagery*

The natural imagery is soft and fluid, emphasizing the harmonious relationship between soul and nature. By linking the soul to elements like wind, dew, and rain-filled air, the poem portrays the soul as an integral part of the natural cycle that gives life and support. The imagery conveys a transcendent connection between humans, the soul, and nature, characteristic of Hildegard's concept of a divinely infused world.

h) *Personification*

The soul is depicted as an active entity that has beneficial effects on its surroundings. Likewise, humans are encouraged to act as living, life-giving forces.

i) *Imperative*

The poem addresses the reader directly: “Desgleichen ströme der Mensch / Wohlwollen aus auf alle” (In the same way, let humans' stream forth kindness upon all). The imperative tone is particularly strong in lines like “Ein Wind sei er... ein Tau...” (Be a wind... be a dew...), which expresses an ethical demand and a call for moral action (Çetin, 2019).

Interpretation of the Poem

The soul, as an essential force of life and morality, is meant to mirror nature in its care and goodness. Hildegard von Bingen portrays the soul as an integral part of the universe, with a moral duty to help and uplift others.

The depiction of the soul as a natural force conveys the idea of

a harmonious, universal order, where humans, like the soul, are called to participate in the promotion and preservation of life. In comparison to contemporaries like Meister Eckhart, Hildegard's focus is less on the introspective struggle of the soul and more on its cosmic role as an intermediary between the earthly and the divine. Her synthesis of theological insights with her visionary experiences provides a distinct perspective, integrating mystical vision with practical moral guidance. The poem calls for adopting a compassionate attitude and dedicating one's soul to the service of the community, reflecting the Christian ideal of charity and care for those in need.

The soul is depicted as a universal principle that aligns with nature. It is meant to impart life, comfort, and support, just like nature. Humans are urged to consciously use their soul to help others, especially the needy and the suffering. The poem carries a moral undertone, urging humans to cultivate their natural capacity for empathy and compassion. It invites reflection on one's actions and the impact of human kindness on others.

Analysis of the Aphorisms

This selection of aphorisms² by Hildegard von Bingen addresses the soul, its relationship to the body, and to ethical as well as cosmic principles. In the following, these aphorisms are analyzed and interpreted using both literary and hermeneutic analysis methods:

1- “So hat die Seele keine Freude an der Sünde, obwohl sie dabei mit dem Körper wohnt.” (Thus, the soul takes no joy in sin, although it dwells with the body)

Here, the dualism of body and soul is emphasized. The body, as the seat of worldly desires, may be inclined toward sin, but the soul, which represents a higher, more moral plane, finds no joy in it. The soul remains pure, even though it is connected to the sinful body.

2- “Von den guten Werken wird die Seele wie von einem Königsmantel umhüllt, von den schlechten aber verdunkelt, wie auch die Erde von Wassern durchströmt wird.” (By good deeds, the soul is cloaked like a king's mantle, but by bad deeds, it is darkened, just as the earth is permeated by waters.)

The soul is illuminated and adorned by good deeds, like a king with his mantle. Bad deeds, on the other hand, darken the soul, analogous to the earth being saturated with water. Here, the moral effect of actions on the soul is depicted metaphorically.

3- “Wie die Seele den Leib belebt und stärkt, so wärmen und stärken auch die Sonne, der Mond und die übrigen Planeten das Firmament mit ihrem Feuer.” (As the soul enlivens and strengthens the body, so too do the sun, moon, and other planets warm and strengthen the firmament with their fire.)

The soul is here described as a kind of inner fire that enlivens the body, similar to how celestial bodies illuminate and warm the universe. A cosmic parallel is drawn between the vitality of the soul and the natural forces of the universe.

4- “Wenn die Seele etwas spürt, was für sie und ihren Leib ungünstig ist, zieht sie das Herz, die Leber und die Gefäße zusammen...” (When the soul senses something unfavorable for

² The aphorisms were chosen from these sources:

Flanagan, S. (1998). *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (2nd Editio). Routledge.
Bingen, Hildegard von. Buch der Lebensverdienste (Liber vitae meritorum). Übersetzt

und eingeleitet von Heinrich Schipperges. Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1993.
Bingen, von Hildegard. Das Buch der göttlichen Werke (Liber divinorum operum).
Übersetzt und kommentiert von Mechthild Heieck. Freiburg: Herder, 2005.

itself and its body, it contracts the heart, liver, and vessels...)

This aphorism describes a close connection between emotional and physical states. The soul reacts to harmful or unfavorable influences, causing physical effects like the contraction of the heart and a darkness that envelops the body. It describes sadness and emotional pain.

5- *“Wie die Sonne das Licht des Tages ist, so ist auch die Seele das Licht des wachenden Körpers. Und wie der Mond das Licht der Nacht ist, so ist auch die Seele das Licht des schlafenden Körpers.”* (Just as the sun is the light of the day, so too is the soul the light of the waking body. And just as the moon is the light of the night, so too is the soul the light of the sleeping body.)

The soul is depicted as the source of inner vitality, comparable to the sun and moon that illuminate day and night. It remains active both in waking and in sleep, guiding and supporting the body.

6- *“Der Körper ist an keiner Stelle ohne Seele, weil sie mit ihrer eigenen Wärme den ganzen Körper durchströmt.”* (The body is never without the soul, as it permeates the entire body with its own warmth.)

This aphorism emphasizes the omnipresence of the soul within the body. The soul is described as a source of energy that fills the entire body with warmth and life. There is no part of the body that is separated from the soul.

7- *“Die Seele ist ein Hauch, der zum Guten strebt, das Fleisch aber neigt zur Sünde hin.”* (The soul is a breath that strives toward goodness, but the flesh tends toward sin.)

Again, the dualism between soul and body is highlighted. While the soul constantly strives for goodness, the flesh draws humans toward sin. It is a description of the inner conflict between moral striving and bodily temptations.

8- *“Die Seele liebt in allen Dingen das diskrete Maß...”* (The soul loves moderation in all things...)

The soul strives for balance and moderation. This aphorism describes the soul as wise and reasonable, favoring the right measure in all things. Humans should take this as a guide and impose moderation on themselves.

9- *“Der Seele haftet eine Erfahrung im Himmlischen wie im Irdischen an.”* (The soul possesses experience in both the heavenly and earthly realms.)

The soul is experienced in both the celestial and earthly domains. It connects the spiritual with the worldly and has access to both spheres, which grants it a special wisdom.

10- *“Die Seele ist wie der Wind, der über die Kräuter weht...”* (The soul is like the wind that blows over the herbs...)

This poetic metaphor describes the soul as an invisible yet effective influence on the world, intended to act with kindness and compassion toward others. Just as the soul, humans should be a healing and supportive force, especially for those who are needy or suffering.

11- *“Der Atem ist der lebendige Hauch der Seele...”* (Breath is the living breath of the soul...)

Breath is regarded here as an expression of the soul. It is a physical manifestation of the life that the soul bestows upon the body. Through breath, humans remain alive, demonstrating the soul's continuous presence.

12- *“Die Macht der Seele kann man in den Augen des Menschen sehen...”* (The power of the soul can be seen in the eyes of a

person...)

The eyes are described as windows to the soul. The clarity and brightness of the eyes reveal the power and presence of the soul within the body. The eyes are not only organs of sight but also expressions of inner vitality and strength.

13- *“Denn die Seele ist es, die dem Menschen den Lebenshauch zusendet...”* (For it is the soul that sends the breath of life to humans...)

The soul is seen as the source of life. It endows humans with vitality and equips them with various abilities that distinguish them from lifeless matter.

14- *“Die Seele ist die Herrin, das Fleisch ist die Magd...”* (The soul is the mistress; the flesh is the servant...)

This aphorism describes the hierarchy between soul and body. The soul holds control and gives life to the body, while the body is subordinate to it. It emphasizes the supremacy of the soul over the physical aspects of human existence (Aydın, 2019).

All these aphorisms reflect a philosophical and spiritual worldview in which the soul is portrayed as an immortal, moral, and life-giving entity. It is the center of human life, while the body plays a subordinate role. A strong dualism between body and soul is emphasized, pointing to a moral order in which the soul seeks goodness and moderation, while the body is inclined toward temptations and sin.

Conclusion

This analysis of Hildegard von Bingen's poem and aphorisms reveals her profound and nuanced understanding of the soul as both a spiritual and moral force. Hildegard's works highlight a deeply rooted dualism where the soul embodies divine guidance, striving for goodness and moral clarity, while the body remains susceptible to earthly temptations. By comparing her concept to modern feminist interpretations, it becomes clear that Hildegard's influence extends beyond medieval theology, offering a timeless model of the soul as a source of ethical strength and compassion.

The poem and aphorisms collectively underscore the soul's role as a bridge between the earthly and the divine, influencing not just the physical body but also guiding ethical behavior. Hildegard's portrayal of the soul aligns with medieval theological thought, yet it stands out for its vivid imagery and poetic expression, which invite readers to reflect on their inner spiritual lives.

Ultimately, Hildegard presents the soul as the essence of human existence, urging individuals to cultivate virtues like compassion, empathy, and moderation. By exploring these timeless spiritual insights, Hildegard's work remains relevant to contemporary discussions in theology and philosophy, offering a perspective that sees the soul not only as a religious concept but also as a source of moral and ethical strength in human life.

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