

Unity Between the Human and the Nonhuman in Wordsworth's 'Lucy Gray, or Solitude'

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Abstract. In 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, which included the poem 'Lucy Gray, or Solitude'. Since then, it has consistently been analyzed alongside Wordsworth's 'Lucy Poems', another set of poems that 'Lucy Gray, or Solitude' does not belong to. The result is a reductive interpretation of 'Solitude' that this paper aims to amend, arguing that 'Lucy Gray, or Solitude' holds value independent of the 'Lucy Poems'. It is particularly prominent when considering Lucy Gray as one of Alan Bewell's 'marginals' or people who live on the fringes of human society. Then, the paper focuses on the form and rhythm of the poem 'Lucy Gray, or Solitude', as well as Lucy Gray's identification with young animals and light. Furthermore, Lucy's symbolic passage of the bridge and the landmarks of its path are analyzed, leading to the question of how Lucy and her parents perceive her disappearance differently. The paper concludes by saying that Lucy Gray achieves unity between the human and the nonhuman.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Romanticism, Lucy Gray.

1. Introduction

During the 19th century, the Romantic movement, emphasizing reverence for nature and individualism, rose to popularity. William Wordsworth was a British pioneer, whose *Lyrical Ballads*, published with Coleridge, heralded the movement. It included the ballad 'Lucy Gray, or Solitude' (mentioned as *Solitude* in the following text).

'Solitude' recounts the disappearance of Lucy Gray, a village girl who becomes a local legend. At her father's request, young Lucy carries a lantern to town, only to be caught up in an early snowstorm. Her parents search for her fruitlessly and find Lucy's footprints in the snow, which stop in the middle of a bridge. According to Wordsworth, the poem is based on a story he heard from his sister, the difference being that the girl from the story is found dead in the canal [1]. For clarity's sake, the poem shall be referred to as "'Solitude'" to separate it from the titular character, Lucy Gray.

Analyses of 'Solitude' often discuss it alongside the 'Lucy Poems', all featuring a muse also named 'Lucy' who shares Lucy Gray's fate. Prominent themes are death—both real and imagined—mourning, and ambiguity. However, as scholars have constantly pointed out, 'Solitude' is not a 'Lucy Poem'. Critic Mark Jones argued that this poem's Lucy Gray does not fulfill any of the criteria needed to be considered a 'Lucy Poem': the age of 'Lucy' should remain ambiguous, as should the relationship between the narrator and his muse [2]. Despite this, 'Solitude' is still primarily studied with the other Lucy, resulting in a somewhat reductive interpretation of Lucy Gray existing solely in the context of Wordsworth's 'Lucy Poems'.

This paper proposes that Lucy Gray holds value independently, especially when considered as what Alan Bewell calls 'marginals' [3]. These marginal figures are the characters who live on the fringes of human society, defining society by delimiting it, according to Paul Fry [4]. Bewell's marginals are generally anthropological, and Lucy Gray, in her isolation from her community, is undoubtedly one of them. In this case, she delimits society by becoming the line between nature and humanity or the nonhuman and the human [4]. Lucy Gray's liminal existence brings a sense of union with nature or the nonhuman.

2. Literature Review

Whether or not 'Solitude' is studied with the 'Lucy Poems', there are myriad interpretations. Opinions of the survival, or lack thereof, of Lucy Gray prove to be divisive. Another popular symbol is the moon, which is mentioned in both 'Solitude' and the 'Lucy Poems'. The latter relates to Lucy Gray's identification with light, part of nature or the nonhuman. Finally, Wordsworthian nature, its existence, and its presence within 'Solitude' are also contested. The relationship between the nonhuman and nature is touched upon.

Papers in favor of Lucy Gray's death include Hendiana's 2015 reading, which believes Lucy to be ultimately dead and that the narrator's hints of her survival are only a way of coping with the fact of her death [5]. She, like the girl in the story that Wordsworth hears, falls into the canal after getting lost in the storm. Several other readings share this realist perspective, though none quite as absolute and the consensus seems to be that Lucy Gray retains a slim chance of survival. She is in a 'perfect solitude' with life, death, and her environment, seemingly achieving something beyond life or death; or, she has been absorbed into nature through death, as she was absorbed by nature in life [6, 7]. This view also corresponds with the idea that Lucy Gray is a symbol of the poet or narrator's ideals [8].

Like Hendiana, Woof emphasizes the narrator's response to Lucy's death. The latter claims the narrator is 'hiding' behind hearsay and folktale, implying that the relationship between the narrator and Lucy Gray is personal [7]. Thus, the relationship in 'Solitude' becomes similar to that of the 'Lucy Poems', with the narrator directly interacting with Lucy, despite Woof's acknowledgment that 'Solitude' is not a part of them. Furthermore, several analyses begin with the assumption that Lucy Gray and Lucy of the 'Lucy Poems' are one [8, 9, 10]. This paper argues that if the two characters were one, Wordsworth would not need to provide a surname (or second name) for Lucy Gray. Additionally, the previously mentioned unambiguous age separates 'Solitude' [2].

The moon, though appearing only once in 'Solitude', is focused on for its connection with "Strange fits of passion I have known", which is a 'Lucy Poem'. The narrator in "Strange Fits" fantasizes about Lucy's death when he sees the moon descend [11]. Lucy is inextricably linked to the moon and more so because of her name, which means 'light' or 'born at daybreak' [12]. Studies have used the moon as another way of connecting Lucy and Lucy Gray. While the connotation of light exists solely for the name 'Lucy', it seems unreasonable to claim that Lucy Gray is identified with the moon [13]. Not only does it appear just once, but it is used in telling the time and not in a way that identifies it with Lucy Gray.

What is proposed here is not discarding the symbol of the moon but incorporating it as part of Lucy Gray's identification with the nonhuman. Light is interpreted as part of nature or the nonhuman, and, in intertwining light with Lucy, further unites the human with the nonhuman.

Lastly, nature. Wordsworthian Nature and the revisionist views of it differ greatly, and this paper does not attempt to review them. Rather, it focuses on the interpretations of nature's presence in 'Solitude'. It is portrayed both neutrally and negatively, with the former being more common. This focuses on nature as a vessel for beauty and ideals, often directly linked to Lucy Gray [8, 12]. On the other hand, the latter shows disdain for human interference and emphasizes the futility of man against nature [5]. This reading sees Lucy Gray as being led astray during the snowstorm by human creations, such as the stone wall, which results in her death.

This paper has used 'nature' and 'the nonhuman' interchangeably thus far since the interpretation here is that nature is part of the nonhuman. However, this is not always the case [4]. The hope is to avoid the connotations of Wordsworthian Nature but retain nature as part of an 'other', in this case, the nonhuman.

3. Analysis

3.1. Section Form, Rhythm, and Journeys

“Solitude” follows a unique structure that includes the ballad form and is also reminiscent of a nursery rhyme. It has sixteen stanzas, each with four lines that alternate between beats of six and eight, or iambic tri-meter and tetrameter. This rhythm is very similar to those of famous nursery rhymes such as “Mary Had A Little Lamb” (8). Folk songs are often told as nursery rhymes, and thematically, the poem’s structure supports the idea that the story of Lucy Gray is a folktale or local legend.

Moreover, this is a local legend centering around journeys. Beyond the repeating structure, the rhyme scheme also follows a pattern. For every stanza save the last, the rhyme scheme is ABAB—the lines of six beats are A, and the lines of eight beats are B. It creates a very steady rhythm that, other than nursery rhymes, is almost similar to footsteps or pacing. This is further supported by the poem’s iambic meter. It likewise is made of two parts, the unstressed syllable, and the stressed syllable, and contributes to the rhythm of pacing or footsteps. Pacing and footsteps with a steady, repeating structure invoke a journey, where the focus is on the trip, not the destination.

Not only do journeys fit the poem structurally, but also thematically. The contents of the poems feature an abundance of journeys: the narrator’s, Lucy Gray’s, and the parents, which can roughly split the poem into different sections. Verses 1-3 and 15-16 belong to the narrator; verses 4-8 and 16 are Lucy Gray’s; and verses 9-14 are the parents’ journey as they look for their daughter. All three can be considered journeys for the emphasis on the trip: the narrator sees Lucy Gray when he “crossed the Wild”, Lucy Gray never makes it to her destination, the Town, and the parents’ never find Lucy.

Toward the end of the poem, the journeys of the narrator and Lucy Gray overlap. While the sixteenth stanza is primarily the narrator’s recounting of the local legend of Lucy Gray, it is also part of Lucy Gray’s journey, albeit when she exists more as a tale than a human. More on this later in section V. She “trips along” without looking back and leaves behind nothing but her song. For the first time, the poem’s rhyme scheme changes, moving from ABAB to ABAC in the 16th and final verse. It is as if the rhyme scheme has “tripped”, changing the second B rhyme to C. The “trip” in rhyme scheme and the “trip” as Lucy Gray moves along intertwine to that form and theme reflect one another again.

3.2. Identifying Lucy with Baby Animals

Throughout the entire poem, the narrator’s section, in particular, Lucy Gray is constantly compared to baby animals, including does, fawns, and hares. When the narrator “chanced” upon Lucy Gray, she is described as having “dwelt” in the Moor, which is devoid of people by definition, with “no mate, no comrade”. Then, after seeing Lucy Gray, the “Child” on the Moor, he also mentions seeing the “Fawn at play” and the “Hare upon the Green” in an obvious parallel structure. By claiming Lucy lived without human company and subsequently comparing her to baby animals, the narrator identifies Lucy with animals, and thus the nonhuman.

Furthermore, the narrator calls Lucy the “solitary Child” which is rhymed with “Wild” twice, in the first and penultimate verses. Firstly, the narrator refers to Lucy according to her biology, Child, instead of her human identity in the same way the Fawn and Hare are referred to. With an emphasis on “solitary,” Lucy is still more isolated from her human identity and ties her to these baby animals. Next, the nouns “Child” and “Wild” are contrasted when they are rhymed together, and inform the dichotomy of the human and the nonhuman for the whole poem. Being the Child but identifying more with the Wild side, Lucy Gray designates the existence of these two groups through her liminal existence between them.

Correspondingly, Lucy Gray is compared to a doe in the seventh verse. Not only is she a doe, but a “mountain roe” which suggests Lucy is experienced at traversing the snowy terrain. She is not “blither” either, which means ‘lacking thought’ archaically; in addition, Lucy responds confidently to her father’s request that she go to the Town with “That, Father! Will I gladly do.” All in all, the

poem seems to imply Lucy's familiarity with the path though it does go on to describe her strokes as "wanton" which has the archaic meaning of 'uncontrolled'.

Lastly, Lucy is identified with a flower or other plant. This occurs early on when the narrator says she is the "sweetest Thing that ever grew/Beside a human door!" Once again, Lucy is described as a "Thing" rather than with her human name, and her growing beside a door suggests a comparison to weeds or wildflowers [7]. The latter two are likewise of the Wild, which paired with calling Lucy a "Thing" seems to emphasize nonhuman aspects.

To summarize, 'Solitude' has compared Lucy Gray to multiple baby animals and flowers while de-emphasizing her human identity by referring to her with anything but her name. This serves to identify Lucy, who is still a human child, with the nonhuman.

3.3. Identifying Lucy with Light

Beyond being identified with flora and fauna, Lucy has also been identified with light. Her name itself is related to the Latin root for light, while her appearances in the poem are all at daybreak and she takes a lantern into the storm. The moon is mentioned, but more for the strangeness of telling the time with the moon rather than its connotations with light.

First and foremost, the name "Lucy" comes from the Latin "Lucius" meaning "as of light" or "born at dawn or daybreak." Its patron saint, Saint Lucy, was a martyr whose feast is a celebration of light because it takes place in the winter [10]. St. Lucy's Day features a procession where young girls hold candles in semi-darkness as well [10]. Correspondingly, 'Solitude' depicts the young Lucy Gray being told to "take the lantern" just as young girls hold the candles, and shows Lucy walking into the storm just as the girls complete the procession in semi-darkness. This binds Lucy to light, especially to light within the darkness.

Moreover, it is always at daybreak that Lucy Gray, or a sign of Lucy Gray appears. The narrator comes across her at the "break of day" in the first stanza, and the parents spot Lucy's footprints one stanza after standing on a hill at "day-break". Lucy belonging to the beginning of the day fits her name, more so when "Gray" is also considered. Saint Lucy encourages the celebration of light within the darkness, which aligns with the essence of the break of day. Furthermore, "Gray", when interpreted as the color grey, has the effect of muting the light of 'Lucy'. Dim light is exactly what is seen at daybreak, further contributing to Lucy's identification with light.

Finally, Lucy Gray tells the time by the day-moon in the fifth verse, which alone does not identify her with light. However, it is very unusual to say "Yonder is the moon" right after the clock has struck two and a village girl is far more likely to tell the time with the sun since the day-moon isn't always visible. One could argue that it isn't a particularly 'human' habit. The presence of the moon here serves to enforce Lucy's identification with the nonhuman, even when Lucy has been identified with light.

3.4. Symbolism in Lucy's Journey

Lucy's journey from her house to the bridge where she disappears is symbolic because of the connotations of bridges and because her footprints end at the very center of the bridge. Additionally, the path between the house and the bridge displays both man-made and natural landmarks, bringing more attention to the previously established dichotomy of Child and Wild. Then, the bridge acts as a link between humanity and nature, and the human and the nonhuman.

Bridges, by definition, connect two physical or figurative places, in this case, the human and the nonhuman. This is because Lucy disappears while crossing the bridge. Even if one believes Lucy is physically dead, and Lucy has crossed from life into death, the bridge is still symbolic for linking life and death together—another pairing of the human and the nonhuman [4]. On the other hand, if one sees the bridge as linking humanity and nature, and Lucy as becoming absorbed by nature, then she has simply moved from the realm of people to the realm of myth. Therefore, the bridge brings together the human with the nonhuman no matter how it is interpreted.

The specific location where Lucy's footprints disappear, the "middle of the plank", is still more symbolic. A midpoint implies a turning point for the plank that links two places. Once crossed, one is closer to the destination than the origin and the same goes for Lucy Gray. This is why it is so important that her footprints disappear in the middle of the bridge as it means Lucy is now closer to the nonhuman (either death or nature) than the human, and no longer leaves behind human footprints. Besides, it further supports the previous symbolism of the bridge.

Being a journey, there ought to be a focus on the trip, which encompasses man-made and natural things, thereby emphasizing the focus on the human/nonhuman dichotomy. Lucy's journey is traced by her parents, who move down a "steep hill's edge" before going through the "broken hawthorn hedge" and passing the "stone wall" and the "open field". The first and last landmarks are all natural while the other two are man-made. Their journey takes two verses worth of space, bringing attention to the co-existence of the human (man-made) and the nonhuman (natural). Likewise, Lucy simultaneously exists as a human child and a nonhuman myth in the wild. Along with the bridge and its midpoint, Lucy's journey serves to unite the human and nonhuman harmoniously.

3.5. Perception of Lucy's Disappearance

That Lucy Gray gets lost in the storm seems to be taken for granted in nearly all analyses, despite it never being explicitly stated. Firstly, Lucy appears calm even when the storm overtakes her, and the reader only extrapolates that Lucy is lost after her parents begin searching for her. However, this does not mean that Lucy considers herself to be lost. It is an issue of one's perception of Lucy's disappearance.

Jointly, one can argue that the sixteenth stanza, the last of Lucy's journey, comes directly after the eighth stanza, where the first part of Lucy's journey ends. This is because they are connected by the wind depicted by the presence of sibilance. Finally, the contrast between Lucy's and her parents' perception of her disappearance originates from their differing views on the human and the nonhuman.

In the eighth stanza, Lucy is trapped in the storm. She moves up and down hills but never arrives at her destination. The poem remarks that Lucy "never reach'd the Town" but does not say she is lost. Rather, readers are encouraged to extrapolate from the build of suspense in this stanza and the next. After learning that the storm came early, Lucy Gray travels and travels without end. Then, readers are told she does not get to Town. The suspense continues in the parents' search: They are "wrecked" and have "cried" and "wept" for their daughter, who readers now believe is lost.

During the eleventh stanza, the tension reaches a breaking point when the tired parents cry "In Heaven, we all shall meet!" before Lucy's footprints are spotted. The footprints are traced and then disappear, and one concludes that Lucy is either dead or lost. However, this is only the parents' point of view. If the wind, represented by sibilance, is any indication of the storm, then the ninth and sixteenth stanzas, where the parents start their search and Lucy is last seen, come one after the other.

Sibilance begins to be prominent in the seventh verse, in which Lucy is compared to a doe. In the snow, Lucy with a "stroke" could "disperse" the "snow" that "rises up like smoke." The repeating 's' sounds are characteristic of the wind, which would help disperse the powdery snow in the air. It continues in the ninth stanza, where the "shouting" parents have "neither sound nor sight/To serve them" in their search. Moreover, it continues in the final stanza: Lucy Gray "sings a solitary song" which "whistles in the wind". The alliteration of both the 's' and the 'w' paired with the sibilance creates the illusion of sweeping wind. All three stanzas invoke wind but in varying states of mind. For the parents', their final state is subdued, while Lucy Gray is happily stumbling across the wilderness. This difference comes from their differing understanding of the human and the nonhuman.

Lucy Gray, as a marginal figure, represents both the human, in her name and biology, and the nonhuman, in her identification with animals and light. Despite her stepping across the bridge's threshold between the human and the nonhuman, she is the embodiment of both these poles. Therefore, she is not separate from either side no matter which realm she resides in. This is not the case for her parents, who view Lucy as part of the nonhuman and thus separate from them.

4. Discussion

Ultimately, 'Solitude' is about achieving unity between the human and the nonhuman through the character of Lucy Gray. She is identified with the nonhuman in the form of baby animals and light, separating her from the human community that includes her parents and the narrator. Incidentally, she is also undeniably human; even in her existence as a local legend, Lucy is still a human child. This makes her a marginal figure, not limited by either pole the way her parents are, but is simultaneously neither human nor nonhuman. As a result, Lucy Gray is, somewhat paradoxically, the embodiment of unity between the human and the nonhuman.

This is further supported by her symbolic passage through the bridge and by all the human and nonhuman landmarks. The same path and bridge result in different circumstances for Lucy and her parents. Lucy managed to fully unite the human and the nonhuman, embodying her marginality and becoming a folktale in the process. Lucy's parents, however, belonging fully to the human side of the dichotomy, do not unite the human and the nonhuman. Instead, the split between the two is larger than ever since experiencing the loss of their daughter. They are distinctly human and consider Lucy to belong to the nonhuman, which is either myth or the underworld, and in doing so, fail to recognize that there is the human in the seemingly nonhuman myth, and nonhuman aspects in their seemingly human world.

In the end, it is these views that cause the parents and Lucy to have different perceptions of Lucy's disappearance. The parents perceive Lucy to be dead and gone while Lucy perceives commonality between the human and the nonhuman. One can unite the two concepts while the other differentiates. Wordsworth, through marginal figures like Lucy Gray, reveals the unity between all things human and nonhuman.

5. Conclusion

All in all, this paper focuses on how the poem 'Solitude' manages to bridge and unite the human and nonhuman through the character of Lucy Gray. Primarily, Lucy Gray is identified with baby animals, including fawn, hare, and doe, connecting a primarily human child to the nonhuman. She is also identified with light. Not only does her name mean "light" in Latin, Lucy Gray also appears at daybreak, carries a lantern into the dark like saint Lucy, and tells the time using the daytime moon.

Furthermore, Lucy Gray has an incredibly symbolic journey moving from her house to the bridge where she disappears. The bridge represents a merging of the human and the nonhuman in the way it links two places together. Landmarks on the journey are split between man-made and natural landmarks, also symbolic of the eventual unity of the human and the nonhuman in Lucy Gray. Finally, the analysis reveals how Lucy's and her parents' perceptions of Lucy's disappearance are different. Lucy, being able to unite the human and nonhuman, can exist harmoniously as a marginal between the two worlds; whereas her parents belong to the human world only, unable to reconcile it with the nonhuman and seeing Lucy as separate from them.

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