

Natural Consolation of Maternal Loss--- Analysis of “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”

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Abstract. The Lucy poems are five of the most famous and wonderful poems of William Wordsworth, who is one of the greatest English poets of the Romanticist era. The Lucy poems are a sequence of touching poems that are loosely connected and rearranged not by the author himself but by later generations. They are about how the persona meets a girl who lives in distant nature and how he grieves for her when she dies. It is widely acknowledged that the theme of the poems is grief and loss towards the persona's lover. However, the identity or the archetype of the girl Lucy has been debated among Literary critics. To explore this, this article takes the final poem of the sequence, “A slumber did my spirit seal” as an example, and holds the argument that Lucy is the subconscious psychological role whose death represents the maternal losses of Wordsworth in his early years, and finally gives the interpretation that the poem conveys the theme that one can find consolation from mother nature to heal one's own psychological wounds, just as in this poem the poet finds sadness and grief no more by realizing the fact the mother nature has embraced his dear Lucy, as well as himself. This article will analyze this argument by the methods of line-by-line close text analysis and interpretation.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, the Lucy poems, Humanity, theme analysis.

1. Introduction

By October 1798, Wordsworth was working on the first drafts of his Poems for Lucy, which included *Strange Fits of Passion I Have Known*, *She Lived Among the Untrodden Ways*, and *A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal*. In December 1798, Wordsworth sent copies of “Strange Fits” and “She Lived” to Coleridge and followed up his letter with “A Slumber.” “A Slumber” was eventually published in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. However, this simple touching poem was written during Wordsworth's sojourn in Goslar in Germany, in the winter of 1798-1799. Autobiographical studies about the archetype and identity of the girl Lucy are various. According to one view, Wordsworth's anguish and annoyance about his friendship with Coleridge are addressed in these poems; others hold the opinion that Lucy is actually his sister Dorothy. However, unique amongst the Lucy poems, “A slumber” does not directly mention Lucy. Therefore, instead of endeavoring to figure out who Lucy is, this paper generally argues more on what Lucy, or ‘she’ represents: first, as a fictitious character, Lucy's death or condition is the projection of the poet's state of mind, which would be a maternal loss in childhood, which, however, is cured by the nature which serves as a consolation, and finally, helping the poet achieve restoration of humanity. The poem was written in October 1798, which is during Wordsworth's travel to Germany with Dorothy and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Perhaps it was the cold German winter of October that awakened a remote, sad memory of Wordsworth and gave him the inspiration and motive to write the poem announcing “her” death, even if her identity is unclear. When Wordsworth was 7 years old, his mother died, and his father sent him to Hawkshead Grammar School in Lancashire and sent Dorothy to live with relatives in Yorkshire, and since then, she and Wordsworth did not meet each other again for nine years. Being two of the closest and most important females in Ann Cookson, Wordsworth and Dorothy successively displaced from young Wordsworth's growth and childhood has an indelible impact on Wordsworth's psyche. It is a sure thing that the death of his mother saddened little Wordsworth, and the separation of his sister constitutes another incident that hurts his immature soul, depriving him of “what little maternal presence” she “might have provided” in Johnston's words [1]. These two

displacements consist of the maternal loss of Wordsworth at a young age. By careful line-by-line analysis of the poem as well as exploration of the subconscious psychological role of Lucy in the psyche of William Wordsworth, this paper hopes to achieve the purpose of justifying that the theme of this poem implies that the poet's trauma caused by early maternal losses reoccurs and is reinforced by the death of the poet's beloved Lucy, however, healed by the consolation of nature and regains his humanity, by viewing mother Nature as his compensation of the maternal losses. This article will endeavor to analyze and justify this argument by the first literary appreciation of the figure of speech and deep underlying meaning analysis of each sentence, second analysis of the psychologically representative role of Lucy of Wordsworth, and finally, the perspective of the change of internal emotion of the persona implied in the poem to justify that Wordsworth has to find consolation through nature and regain his humanity in the end.

2. Line-by-line Interpretation from the perspective of maternal loss

2.1. First stanza

Hillis Miller has commented on this poem in his essay "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism" as a "beautiful, moving, and apparently simple poem" [2]. The poem begins with the first-person narrator reminiscing about his past and remembering how his life was like a deep, unbroken sleep - a sleep in which he was unaware of the danger and had no "human fears" [3]. His "spirit" is in a dream world. This description, or rather, expression, is so numb and feelingless that it leads us into a world of nothingness and nihil where the poet's sleeping soul resides. It seems that the missing part of the maternal companion and love makes the poet fall into a state of nothingness and dehumanization, which is implicated more vividly, as he had no "human fears". Likewise, being in this state, "she" seemed to him to be a transcendent, celestial being who is unaffected by time, i.e., "the touch of earthly years". The choice of the word "earthly" adumbrates in a deeper way that the poet is uncontrollably trapped and damaged by the early loss of the maternal roles in his childhood. Deep down in his psyche, there is an empty part which is so desperately hollow and vacant that it makes the poet an unnatural and inhumane being, which is even more miserable than the death of "her", the maternal role.

In the next two lines, the poet is more than astonished and cannot believe the fact that "she" has gone, "No motion has she now, no force; she neither hears nor sees"[3]. He seems to be overwhelmed with the unbearable, sad fact, that he chooses to slightly refuse and deject reality, like a child too young to feel the grief of the loss of mother and separation of a sibling, therefore became numb and protectively sealed spiritually, a state of "slumber".

2.2. Second stanza

Finally, in the second stanza, reversely, the poet broke away from his individual, limited, sealed world of slumber and embraced a wider god-like view: he saw "she" "rolled round in earth's diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees" He saw that she had joined the spinning of the earth as if he was standing outside and far above the earth, by which he breaks from the seal of slumber and reaches a state of realization of self-awareness, by seeking the help of the nature. The use of alliteration and consonance makes the last line rhythmic, as if mimicking the slow spinning of the planet. Apart from that, the successive use of "and", as a polysyndeton and caesura, gives the lines a more contemplative and serious tone in the end, as if the poet has realized a state of awakening, from the loss of humanity, loss of maternal love, and restored his humanity and fill the vacancy of maternity by the help of the mechanism of nature. Just like Hughes states in his essay, "This critical need—to restore the felt relation to humanity—is evident in the early work, but also beyond, as its underlying premise. Wordsworth, as a poet, was someone for whom humanity and nature were always to be disclosed and rediscovered, never to be assumed [4]." it is a common theme in Wordsworthian poems that the persona finds humanity through nature. This poem as well shows that the poet views the death or displacement of the dear as a natural phenomenon that is contained in the circle of nature. It is

natural and beautiful, just like the rocks, stones, and trees. Once and for all, nature is the return and redemption of human nature.

3. The psychological role of Lucy in the poem by Wordsworth

Just as Wordsworth himself has stated in the Preface to *the Lyrical Ballads*: “For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this is true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply [5].” In this poem, “A slumber did my spirit seal”, the poet shows his powerful feelings that are recollected from his past life. In William Wordsworth’s childhood, his mother died at a young age, and he was forced to separate from his sister for more than 9 years as well. This early loss and displacement of the female immediate family member, as well as being raised by a tough father, has caused a Psychological and emotional gap in his deep heart. Moreover, the appearance of “Lucy” is not necessarily a real person that actually existed during Wordsworth’s life, but rather an imaginative lover that is invented by the poet has been filling the maternal role that is a consolation to his early losses. “The so-called complex refers to the desire, emotion or idea that is repressed by consciousness but is unconsciously persistent and has instinctive impulses at its core [6].” Though Wordsworth is definitely not having the Oedipus complex brought up by Freud, the only reason can explain Wordsworth’s such grieve pain by the death of a seemingly “unknown” and obsolete girl can justify the fact that Wordsworth is actually seeking psychological compensation, not for mother, which would be kind of unethical and un-Worthworthian, but for the long-lost intimate relationship and ardent emotions. Lucy or love is the representative of all the female families that are close to him once. Moreover, by depicting death taking Lucy from him, he subconsciously implies the trauma brought by the loss of his mother and the displacement of his sister in early life. As analyzed before, the “slumber” state that has dominated his soul refers metaphorically to the psychologically crashed and extreme insecurity deep down Wordsworth’s heart caused by the loss. “I had no human fear” This line goes on to confirm the theory, showing that facing the devastating trauma, the poet has chosen the negative way rather than sealing his emotion and feeling to avoid being hurt too badly. In the next line: “No motion has she now, no force, she neither hears or sees”, the poet feels so lost and insecure because the cruel barrier between life and death has made him lose connection to his beloved one, which implies that he, accordingly, loses connection to the world, being a state of depression and dehumanization [3]. Also, this line can also be interpreted as the transference of the poet’s emotion to Lucy. The poet himself is, in fact, the one who loses connection in desperate loneliness after the loss of his lover, his endearing maternal companion. Therefore, either way, it can come to the conclusion that Lucy is the representative of the poet’s maternal close relationships who serves the role of filling the emotional gap that originated from his childhood experience.

4. Whole Again by Natural Consolation: Humanity Regained

The last line is the emotional turning point of the poem. The poet is so devastated and painful by the death of his lover, the one that can fill his hole to heal his early loss. However, now she is gone too, and the poet has received a second trauma, and this could only be worse than the first one in his early childhood. He chooses to seal himself, abandoning all connections to the world and others, and seal his emotions and feelings. However, shockingly, in the next line, his narrow and self-oriented view has suddenly been opened up to a much wider one: he saw that the body of Lucy had joined the earth’s diurnal course along with the natural things: rocks, stone and trees. This is a wide point of view as if he is standing out of the earth, in the universe, to view this action of Lucy’s body along with the earth’s spinning. Clearly, the influence of the power of nature deep down in his heart has begun to function and heal, which is also indicated in the last line of the poem, as in the obvious natural elements as well as the conceit-like scene that Lucy’s body spins as the earth spins. Ralph Waldo

Emerson has said, “The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature [7].” Wordsworth was born in Cumberland, which is in the northwest of England. It is the famous Lake District with beautiful scenery. Wordsworth had a close relationship with nature since childhood. In his childhood, he was intoxicated by the beauty of the Lake District. His mind was caressed, admonished and guided by nature, and he never deviated from the track of nature. “Living in the solemn, quiet and mysterious lake district since childhood, the poet not only felt the beauty of nature, but also understood the immortal spirit of the universe existing in nature and realized the harmony between man and nature [8].” His views are connected bigger world or universe rather than the sealing status before. Furthermore, the tone of the poet has changed from painful and insecure to calm and wise, giving a contemplating awakening to the poet himself that it is time to get over with and embrace the sad but common fact that the ones we love cannot always be around with us, and it is only a matter of time before we say goodbye to them. “In fact, ‘nature’ is a concept of cultural philosophy. Some scholars divide ‘nature’ into internal and external levels. One is ‘internal nature’ (equivalent to the way between man and the universe or the nature of the universe), and the other is ‘external nature’ (the natural landscape we can feel, see and touch) [9].” Wordsworth has reached the internal nature and received consolation from nature to alleviate his earthly pain of bereavement of earlier years, and the loss of lover later. Then, the poet has found his inner strength and consolation through mother nature, who is the only one that eternally exists around human beings. She helps cure once and for all the psychological traumas of the poet and serves as a majestic and powerful maternal role that can always produce inner power not just for the poet but for the whole of human beings. The three objects: “rocks”, “stones”, and “trees”, as three very masculine words, imply that the poet has recovered and found strength in mother nature and is inner-powerful and whole again. On the other hand, Just as Xu Shuli has stated in his essay ‘On the Images in Wordsworth's Lucy Series’: “The cyclical motion is most strongly expressed in the fifth poem, ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, where the eternal laws of the universe are embodied by the daily rotation of the Earth, as it bears Lucy's all [10].” In this sense, Lucy has gain “the resurrection” by cause of nature.

In this natural diurnal course, he has regained his humanity under the guidance and hint of the great nature and gains a philosophical truth that nature is always the best consolation of earthly pain. He feels relieved that Lucy has returned to nature, sad and painful no more. He has learned to be strong to face the parting of all the endearing maternal roles that are influential to his life and finds strength within himself calmly, from the majesty and stateliness of nature.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, from the point of view of the autobiographical study, this paper analyzes “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” in connection with the early maternal loss of the poet Wordsworth. As stated before, it is a common theme in Wordsworthian poems that the persona finds humanity through nature. Wordsworth has given a spontaneous overflow that is from his past recollection by implying the loss lover Lucy is an allusion to his early loss of his mother and displacement of his sister, for example, maternal losses. However, he finally successfully conquers this depression and deep-rooted trauma by turning to mother nature as consolation, who gives him a valuable life-and-death lesson and gives him the inner strength to deal with earthly pain and loss. This poem is no exception as well. Lucy, or “she”, is a projection of the state of mind of Wordsworth, which shifts from the desperate and deep loss to the restoration to humanity, with the redemption of mother nature, who kindly gives it to every broken person.

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