

Romantic Aesthetics in "Lucy Gray"

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Abstract

Nature has endowed life with enormous beauty which can be found out and enjoyed through five senses as sensuousness is a very important dimension of Romantic aesthetics— all those dimensions of beauty that along with appealing to senses go deep into the heart and imprint its image on the heart. The purpose of this research paper is to find out Romantic aesthetics in "Lucy Gray" composed by William Wordsworth.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, Romantic Aesthetics, Lucy Gray

Introduction

William Wordsworth – a poet of Nature – is convinced that he is Nature's true priest, worshipper of nature and a revealer of her harmonies to humanity. He loves nature and natural objects in all its forms and this love of nature leads him to the love of humanity. Lucy Gray is one of these natural objects whose description is delectable for Wordsworth. He has love and sympathy for this little girl because she is a source of inspiration for the poet to compose this poem. The poet's love and sentiments for this little girl is because of aesthetic elements and the main focus of this paper is to highlight them.

According to J.A. Cudden, "aesthetics signifies something which pertains to the criticism of the beautiful or to the theory of taste".¹ Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy which tries to make clear the laws and principles of beauty contrasted with morality and utility. Oxford Dictionary defines aesthetics as "a set of principles concerned with appreciation of beauty and a branch of philosophy which deals with the question of beauty and artistic task".² There are aesthetic elements in the poem "Lucy Gray". An object of nature is either seen, heard, felt, touched or tasted for aesthetics. There are five senses which are pre-requisites for the enjoyment of beauty: sight (visual), sound (auditory), smell (olfactory), touch (tactile) and taste (gustatory) and "the Romantics knew how to use their senses."³ Feelings, imaginations, images and emotions of the poet or situations and scenes etc, are of fundamental

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importance for Romantic poets and William Wordsworth is no exception as his poetry would not have been possible without imaginations. In aesthetics, the feelings are expressed, as "aesthetics is something other than criticism, appreciation, or creation."⁴ William Wordsworth puts his emotions delightfully as in pure aesthetics only emotions are considered. Before analyzing the poem, its historical background is essential for understanding the poem. Just after publication of his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth sailed for Hamburg with his sister. He hoped that their imperfect acquaintance with the German language might be reformed at Goslar. But at Goslar, they could not make any acquaintances except reading German books. They spent nearly four months at Goslar and this period was the bloom of Wordsworth's literary and poetic career. It was here that he wrote *Lucy Gray*. The poem was inspired as Wordsworth was being surrounded by snow and Dorothy's, his sister, memory of a real incident that happened at Halifax.⁵ About *Lucy Gray* he remarks, "It was founded on a circumstance told me by my Sister, of a little girl who, not far from Halifax in Yorkshire, was bewildered in a snow-storm. Her footsteps were traced by her parents to the middle of the lock of a canal, and no other vestige of her, backward or forward, could be traced. The body however was found in the canal"⁶ Bennett Weaver points out that "The dominant theme of the poems of 1799 is death: death for the children of the village school, for Matthew's daughter, and for *Lucy Gray*"⁷ and Mary Moorman believes that *Lucy Gray* is the "most haunting of all his ballads of childhood"⁸ *Lucy Gray*, like the *Lucy* of the *Lucy* poems and *Ruth* of Wordsworth's "Ruth" are, according to H. W. Garrod, part of "an order of beings who have lapsed out of nature - the nature of woods and hills - into human connections hardly strong enough to hold them. Perpetually they threaten to fall back into a kind of *things* or a kind of spirits."⁹ Wordsworth is trying to describe how *Lucy*, a girl connected to nature, dies.¹⁰ She is part of nature, according to Robert Langbaum, because Wordsworth "makes the human figure seem to evolve out of and pass back into the landscape."¹¹ Wordsworth wrote, in reference to *Lucy Gray*, "the way in which the incident was treated and the spiritualizing of the character might furnish hints for contrasting the imaginative influences which I have endeavoured to throw over common life with Crabbe's matter of fact style of treating subjects of the same kind."¹² By this, Raymond Havens points out, Wordsworth is trying to pull away from realism into a state dominated by the imagination.¹³ To Wordsworth, the imagination was connected to both ethics and aesthetics, and he sought to exalt the imagination in *Lucy Gray*.¹⁴ Paul De Man believes that there is a "loss of name in the *Lucy Gray* poems where death makes her into an anonymous

entity.”¹⁵ As discussed in the introduction of this essay, five senses are exploited for aesthetics, so first of all visual sense is applied to “Lucy Gray”.

Sight

The poet saw a lonely girl at the time of dawn. It is the sense of sight.

*I chanced to see at break of day, The solitary child.*¹⁶

In line 9, the poet says that you may see the young one of a deer playing and jumping. Here he uses the word “spy” which is the optimum of the word “see”. Then he says that you may see the hare upon the green.

*You yet may spy the fawn at play, The hare upon the green.*¹⁷

In lines 36 and 40, the poet uses the word “sight” and “saw”. He says that there was no sight of Lucy Gray and then they saw a wooden bridge.

*But there was neither sound nor sight
And thence they saw the bridge of wood.*¹⁸

In line 44, the poet says that the mother of Lucy Gray saw the foot prints of Lucy Gray and again uses the word “spy”

*When in the snow the mother spied
The print of Lucy's feet.*¹⁹

In line 60, the poet uses the word “see”.

*That you may see sweet Lucy Gray Upon the lonesome wild.*²⁰

Similarly, there are a number of visual images in the poem which appeal to the sense of sight, though the word “see” or “sight” has not been used. These are the optical and spectacular sights which attract the sense of sight and then go deep into the heart of a human being. These beautiful objects of Nature lead to investment in the heart and the soul. For instance, when the poet uses the word snow in line 16 when he says: your mother through the snow.

The word moon has an appeal to the sense of sight as moon is something attractive and beautiful which is often used as a symbol of beauty. In lines 26-29, he uses the word mountain roe and says that Lucy Gray is happier than the mountain deer and when she walks, she disperses the powdery snow which rises like smoke. It is a beautiful image which has got aesthetic pleasure to provide to the spectators.

*Not blither is the mountain roe:
With many a wanton stroke*

*Her feet disperse the powdery snow,
That rises up like smoke²⁰*

From line 46 onward, there are a number of visual images enumerated by the poet when he says that the parents of Lucy Gray came down from the steep hill's edge, followed the footprints of the child, through the broken hawthorn hedge, by the long stone-wall and then crossed an open field.

In the presentation of Nature, Wordsworth is fascinated by the sound in the objects of nature, just as Shelley was fascinated by the colour in the spectacles of nature. The following lines from The Solitary Reaper exhibit the poet's enthusiasm for sound in nature:

*A voice so thrilling never was heard
In spring time from the cuckoo bird
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.²¹*

Sound

In the very first line of the poem, the poet uses the word "heard" in which he says that he had often heard about a little child called Lucy Gray. It is the sense of sound.

Oft I had heard of Lucy Gray²²

In line 19 the poet says that the church clock has struck two. Here the poet uses the word struck which appeals to the sense of sound.

The minster clock has struck two²³

In line 35, the poet uses the word shouting which appeals to the sense of sound. He describes the miserable condition and the sense of fear of Lucy's parents because she did not return home. They went out shouting everywhere all that night in search of Lucy Gray.

*The wretched parents all that night
Went shouting far and wide²⁴*

In line 42, the word cried has been used which again appeals to the sense of sound.

*A furlong from their door
They wept-and, turning homeward cried
"In heaven we all shall meet",²⁵*

In the concluding two lines, the poet uses the words "sings" and whistles" which are the most appealing words for the sense of sound.

And sings a solitary song

*That whistles in the wind*²⁶

In all of the above lines the entire impact is that of sound.

Taste

In line 7 and 11 the poet says that she was the most beautiful child ever born on the earth. He uses the word "sweetest" which is a comprehensive term appealing to all senses especially to the sense of taste.

*She dwelt on a wide moor,
-The sweetest thing that ever grew
Beside a human door
.....
But the sweet face of Lucy Gray
Will never more be seen.*²⁷

Similarly in line 59, the poet says that some people still believe that she is still alive and that you may see the sweet face of Lucy Gray on the wild moor.

*That you may see the sweet Lucy Gray
Upon the lonesome wild.*²⁸

Conclusion

The poem "Lucy Gray" focuses on a little child –a manifestation of aesthetic elements and features. These aesthetic features appeal to the five senses. It is a great piece of Wordsworth's creative talent which observes the dimensions of romantic aesthetics. He highlights these dimensions in such a way the scene comes almost in front of the readers. Beauty – the ability of an object to appeal to the senses and provide emotional satisfaction – is manifest in the poem appealing to the senses of the readers and the listeners of the poem.

Notes & References

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- ²² William Wordsworth, "Lucy Gray"
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