

# STUDY OF AESTHETICS IN WORDSWORTH'S “LUCY POEMS”

**\*Dr.R.V.Sheela, Associate Professor, Dept. of English, MES College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Bangalore.**

## Abstract

This paper attempts to study significance of **Lucy poems**, the processes of growth and decay, as well as the relationship between man and nature. The Lucy poems are a series of five poems composed by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) between 1798 and 1801. All but one were first published during 1800 in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaboration between Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge that was both Wordsworth's first major publication and a milestone in the early English Romantic movement. In the series, Wordsworth sought to write unaffected English verse infused with abstract ideals of beauty, nature, love, longing and death.

The poem was written during a short period while the poet lived in Germany. Although they individually deal with a variety of themes, as a series they focus on the poet's longing for the company of his friend Coleridge, who had travelled with him to Germany but took up residence separately in the university town of Göttingen, and on his increasing impatience with his sister Dorothy, who had travelled with him abroad. Wordsworth examines the poet's unrequited love for the idealised character of Lucy, an English girl who has died young. The idea of her death weighs heavily on the poet throughout the series, imbuing it with a melancholic, elegiac tone. Whether Lucy was based on a real woman or was a figment of the poet's imagination has long been a matter of debate among scholars. Generally reticent about the poems, Wordsworth never revealed the details of her origin or identity. Some scholars speculate that Lucy is based on his sister Dorothy, while others see her as a fictitious or hybrid character. Most critics agree that she is essentially a literary device upon whom he could project, meditate and reflect.

The "Lucy poems" consist of "Strange fits of passion have I known", "She dwelt among the untrodden ways", "I travelled among unknown men", "Three years she grew in sun and shower", and "A slumber did my spirit seal". Although they are presented as a series in modern anthologies, Wordsworth did not conceive of them as a group, nor did he seek to publish the poems in sequence. He described the works as "experimental" in the prefaces to both the 1798 and 1800 editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, and revised the poems significantly—shifting their thematic emphasis—between 1798 and 1799.

Keywords: Analysis, Death, Identification, Love, Wordsworth, Nature, **Lucy Poems**, Anthropocene,

## Introduction

In 1798, Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge jointly published *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*, a collection of verses each had written separately. The book became hugely popular and was published widely; it is generally considered a herald of the Romantic movement in English literature. In it, Wordsworth aimed to use everyday language in his compositions as set out in the preface to the 1802 edition: "The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection

of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect."

The two poets had met three years earlier in either late August or September 1795 in Bristol. The meeting laid the foundation for an intense and profoundly creative friendship, based in part on their shared disdain for the artificial diction of the poetry of the era. Beginning in 1797, the two lived within walking distance of each other in Somerset, which solidified their friendship. Wordsworth believed that his life before meeting Coleridge was sedentary and dull, and that his poetry amounted to little. Coleridge influenced Wordsworth, and his praise and encouragement inspired Wordsworth to write prolifically. Dorothy, Wordsworth's sister, related the effect Coleridge had on her brother in a March 1798 letter: "His faculties seem to expand every day, he composes with much more facility than he did, as to the mechanism of poetry, and his ideas flow faster than he can express them." With his new inspiration, Wordsworth came to believe he could write poetry rivalling that of John Milton. He and Coleridge planned to collaborate, but never moved beyond suggestions and notes for each other.

The expiration of Wordsworth's Alfoxton House lease soon provided an opportunity for the two friends to live together. They conceived a plan to settle in Germany with Dorothy and Coleridge's wife, Sara, "to pass the two ensuing years in order to acquire the German language, and to furnish ourselves with a tolerable stock of information in natural science". In September 1798, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Dorothy travelled to Germany to explore proximate living arrangements, but this proved difficult. Although they lived together in Hamburg for a short time, the city was too expensive for their budgets. Coleridge soon found accommodations in the town of Ratzeburg in Schleswig-Holstein, which was less expensive but still socially vibrant. The impoverished Wordsworth, however, could neither afford to follow Coleridge nor provide for himself and his sister in Hamburg; the siblings instead moved to moderately priced accommodations in Goslar in Lower Saxony, Germany. Wordsworth characterised the two poems thus to mitigate any disappointment Coleridge might suffer in receiving these two poems instead of the promised three-part philosophical epic *The Recluse*.

In the same letter, Wordsworth complained that:

As I have had no books I have been obliged to write in self-defense. I should have written five times as much as I have done but that I am prevented by an uneasiness at my stomach and side, with a dull pain about my heart. I have used the word pain, but uneasiness and heat are words which more accurately express my feelings. At all events it renders writing unpleasant. Reading is now become a kind of luxury to me. When I do not read I am absolutely consumed by thinking and feeling and bodily exertions of voice or of limbs, the consequence of those feelings.

Wordsworth partially blamed Dorothy for the abrupt loss of Coleridge's company. He felt that their finances—insufficient for supporting them both in Ratzeburg—would have easily supported him alone, allowing him to follow Coleridge. Wordsworth's anguish was compounded by the contrast between his life and that of his friend. Coleridge's financial means allowed him to entertain lavishly and to seek the company of nobles and intellectuals; Wordsworth's limited wealth constrained him to a quiet and modest life. Wordsworth's envy seeped into his letters when he described Coleridge and his new friends as "more favored sojourners" who may "be chattering and chatter'd to, through the whole day".

Although Wordsworth sought emotional support from his sister, their relationship remained strained throughout their time in Germany. Separated from his friend and forced to live in the sole company of his sister, Wordsworth used the "Lucy poems" as an emotional outlet.

**Objective:**

This paper intends to explore and analyze **The Lucy poems; Wordsworth** look at the poet's unrequited love for the idealised character of Lucy, an English girl who has died young. The idea of her death weighs heavily on the poet throughout the series, imbuing it with a melancholic, elegiac tone.

**Identity of Lucy**

Wordsworth did not reveal the inspiration for the character of Lucy, and over the years the topic has generated intense speculation among literary historians. Little biographical information can be drawn from the poems—it is difficult even to determine Lucy's age. In the mid-19th century, Thomas DeQuincey (1785–1859), author and one-time friend of Wordsworth, wrote that the poet "always preserved a mysterious silence on the subject of that 'Lucy', repeatedly alluded to or apostrophised in his poems, and I have heard, from gossiping people about Hawkshead, some snatches of tragic story, which, after all, might be an idle semi-fable, improved out of slight materials."

Critic Herbert Hartman believes Lucy's name was taken from "a neo-Arcadian commonplace", and argues she was not intended to represent any single person. In the view of one Wordsworth biographer, Mary Moorman (1906–1994), "The identity of 'Lucy' has been the problem of critics for many years. But Wordsworth is a poet before he is a biographer, and neither 'Lucy' nor her home nor his relations with her are necessarily in the strict sense historical. Nevertheless, as the Lyrical Ballads were all of them 'founded on fact' in some way, and as Wordsworth's mind was essentially factual, it would be rash to say that Lucy is entirely fictitious."

Moorman suggests that Lucy may represent Wordsworth's romantic interest Mary Hutchinson, but wonders why she would be represented as one who died. It is possible that Wordsworth was thinking of Margaret Hutchinson, Mary's sister who had died. There is no evidence, however, that the poet loved any of the Hutchinsons other than Mary. It is more likely that Margaret's death influenced but is not the foundation for Lucy.

W. Crowbent, 1907, Portrait of Dorothy Wordsworth, depicting her later in life, (drawing from a photograph).

In 1980, Hunter Davies contended that the series was written for the poet's sister Dorothy, but found the Lucy–Dorothy allusion "bizarre". Earlier, literary critic Richard Matlak tried to explain the Lucy–Dorothy connection, and wrote that Dorothy represented a financial burden to Wordsworth, which had effectively forced his separation from Coleridge. Wordsworth, depressed over the separation from his friend, in this interpretation, expresses both his love for his sister and fantasies about her loss through the poems. Throughout the poems, the narrator's mixture of mourning and antipathy is accompanied by denial and guilt; his denial of the Lucy–Dorothy relationship and the lack of narratorial responsibility for the death of Lucy allow him to escape from questioning his desires for the death of his sister. After Wordsworth began the "Lucy poems", Coleridge wrote, "Some months ago Wordsworth transmitted to me a most sublime Epitaph / whether it had any reality, I cannot say. —Most probably, in some gloomier moment he had fancied the moment in which his Sister might die." It is, however, possible that Wordsworth simply feared her death and did not wish it, even subconsciously.

Reflecting on the significance and relevance of Lucy's identity, the 19th-century poet, essayist and literary critic Frederic Myers (1843–1901) observed that:

here it was that the memory of some emotion prompted the lines on "Lucy". Of the history of that emotion, he has told us nothing; I forbear, therefore, to inquire concerning it, or even to speculate. That it was to the poet's honour, I do not doubt; but who ever learned such secrets rightly? or who should wish to learn? It is best to leave the sanctuary of all hearts inviolate, and to respect the reserve not only of the living but of the dead. Of these poems, almost alone, Wordsworth in his autobiographical notes has said nothing whatever.

### **Metaphor for the inner emotional experience**

Wordsworth's voice slowly disappears from the poems as they progress, and his voice is entirely absent from the fifth poem. His love operates on the subconscious level, and he relates to Lucy more as a spirit of nature than as a human being. The poet's grief is private, and he is unable to fully explain its source. When Lucy's lover is present, he is completely immersed in human interactions and the human aspects of nature, and the death of his beloved is a total loss for the lover. The 20th-century critic Spencer Hall argues that the poet represents a "fragile kind of humanism".

"Strange fits of passion have I known"

Main article: Strange fits of passion have I known

Wikisource has original text related to this article:

Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known

"Strange fits" is probably the earliest of the poems and revolves around a fantasy of Lucy's death. It describes the narrator's journey to Lucy's cottage and his thoughts along the way. Throughout, the motion of the moon is set in opposition to the motion of the speaker. The poem contains seven stanzas, a relatively elaborate structure which underscores his ambivalent attitude towards Lucy's imagined death. The constant shifts in perspective and mood reflect his conflicting emotions. The first stanza, with its use of dramatic phrases such as "fits of passion" and "dare to tell", contrasts with the subdued tone of the rest of the poem. As a lyrical ballad, "Strange fits" differs from the traditional ballad form, which emphasises abnormal action, and instead focuses on mood.

The presence of death is felt throughout the poem, although it is mentioned explicitly only in the final line. The moon, a symbol of the beloved, sinks steadily as the poem progresses, until its abrupt drop in the penultimate stanza. That the speaker links Lucy with the moon is clear, though his reasons are unclear. The moon nevertheless plays a significant role in the action of the poem: as the lover imagines the moon slowly sinking behind Lucy's cottage, he is entranced by its motion. By the fifth stanza, the speaker has been lulled into a somnambulistic trance—he sleeps while still keeping his eyes on the moon (lines 17–20).

Lucy's "untrodden ways" are symbolic of both her physical isolation and the unknown details of her thoughts and life as well as her sense of mystery. The third quatrain is written with an economy intended to capture the simplicity the narrator sees in Lucy. Her femininity is described in girlish terms. This has drawn criticism from those who see the female icon, in the words of literary scholar John Woolford, "represented in Lucy by condemning her to death while denying her the actual or symbolic fulfillment of maternity". To evoke the "loveliness of body and spirit", a pair of complementary but paradoxical images are employed in the second stanza: the solitary, hidden violet juxtaposed to the publicly visible Venus, emblem of love and first star of evening. Wondering if Lucy more resembles the violet or the star, the critic Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994) concludes that while Wordsworth likely views her as "the single star, completely dominating world, not arrogantly like the sun, but

sweetly and modestly", the metaphor is a conventional compliment with only vague relevance. For Wordsworth, Lucy's appeal is closer to the violet and lies in her seclusion and her perceived affinity with nature.

### Theme of loss and death

The last of the "Lucy poems" to be composed, "I travelled among unknown men", was the only one not included in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Although Wordsworth claimed that the poem was composed while he was still in Germany, it was in fact written during April 1801. Evidence for this later date comes from a letter Wordsworth wrote to Mary Hutchinson referring to "I travelled" as a newly created poem. In 1802, he instructed his printer to place "I travelled" immediately after "A slumber did my spirit seal" in *Lyrical Ballads*, but the poem was omitted. It was later published in *Poems*, in Two Volumes in 1807.

The poem has frequently been read as a declaration of Wordsworth's love for his native England and his determination not to live abroad again:

'Tis past, that melancholy dream!

Nor will I quit thy shore

A second time; for still I seem

To love thee more and more. (lines 5–8)

The first two stanzas seem to speak of the poet's personal experience, and a patriotic reading would reflect his appreciation and pride for the English landscape. The possibility remains, however, that Wordsworth is referring to England as a physical rather than a political entity, an interpretation that gains strength from the poem's connections to the other "Lucy poems".

Lucy only appears in the second half of the poem, where she is linked with the English landscape. As such, it seems as if nature joins with the narrator in mourning for her, and the reader is drawn into this mutual sorrow.

Many Victorian critics appreciated the emotion of the "Lucy poems" and focused on "Strange fits". John Wilson, a personal friend of both Wordsworth and Coleridge, described the poem in 1842 as "powerfully pathetic". In 1849, critic Rev. Francis Jacox, writing under the pseudonym "Parson Frank", remarked that "Strange fits" contained "true pathos. We are moved to our soul's centre by sorrow expressed as that is; for, without periphrasis or wordy anguish, without circumlocution of officious and obtrusive, and therefore, artificial grief; the mourner gives sorrow words... But he does it in words as few as may be: how intense their beauty!" A few years later, John Wright, an early Wordsworth commentator, described the contemporary perception that "Strange fits" had a "deep but subdued and 'silent fervour'". Other reviewers emphasised the importance of "She dwelt among the untrodden ways", including Scottish writer William Angus Knight (1836–1916), when he described the poem as an "incomparable twelve lines". The poet's sense of loss is sublime in its utter simplicity. He finds harmony rather than harshness in the contrast between the illusion of love and the fact of death." Later critics focused on the importance of the poems to Wordsworth's poetic technique. Durrant argued that "The four 'Lucy' poems which appeared in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* are worth careful attention, because they represent the clearest examples of the success of Wordsworth's experiment." Alan Grob (1932–2007) focused less on the unity that the poems represent and believed that "the principal importance of the 'Matthew' and 'Lucy' poems, apart from their intrinsic achievement, substantial as that is, is in suggesting the presence of seeds of discontent even in a period of seemingly assured faith that makes the sequence of

developments in the history of Wordsworth's thought a more orderly, evolving pattern than the chronological leaps between stages would seem to imply."

Later critics de-emphasised the significance of the poems in Wordsworth's artistic development. Hunter Davies (b. 1936) concluded that their impact relies more on their popularity than importance to Wordsworth's poetic career. Davies went on to claim, "The poems about Lucy are perhaps Wordsworth's best-known work which he did in Germany, along with 'Nutting' and the Matthew poems, but the most important work was the beginning of *The Prelude*" (emphasis in original). Some critics emphasised the importance behind Lucy as a figure, including Geoffrey Hartman (b. 1929), when he claimed, "It is in the Lucy poems that the notion of spirit of place, and particularly English spirit of place, reaches its purest form." Writer and poet Meena Alexander (b. 1951) believed that the character of Lucy "is the impossible object of the poet's desire, an iconic representation of the Romantic feminine."

## Conclusion

The subject present in the Lucy Poems are nature, love, loss and death. They are characterized by their imagery of nature and the way it reflects the feelings and emotions of the speaker. The poems often use the natural world as a metaphor for the inner emotional experience of the speaker. They also explore the theme of loss and death, particularly in the poem "Three years she grew in sun and shower," where the speaker reflects on the life and death of Lucy. The idea of love is also present, as the speaker reflects on the love he had for Lucy and how it has changed and evolved after her death. At the beginning of the 20th century, literary critic David Rannie praised the poems as a whole: "that strange little lovely group, which breathe a passion unfamiliar to Wordsworth, and about which he—so ready to talk about the genesis of his poems—has told us nothing. Let a poet keep some of his secrets: we need not grudge him the privacy when the poetry is as beautiful as this; when there is such celebration of girlhood, love, and death"

## References

1. Alexander, Meena. *Women in Romanticism*. Savage, MD: Barnes & Noble Books, 1989. ISBN 0-389-20885-X.
2. Bateson, F. W. *Wordsworth: A Re-Interpretation*. London: Longmans, 1954.
3. Beatty, Frederika. *William Wordsworth of Dove Cottage*. New York: Bookman Associates, 1964.
4. Beer, John. *Wordsworth and the Human Heart*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978. ISBN 0-231-04646-4.
5. Blades, John. *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. ISBN 1-4039-0480-4.
6. Blank, G. Kim. *Wordsworth and Feeling: The Poetry of an Adult Child*. London: Associated University Presses, 1995. ISBN 0-8386-3600-4.
7. Branch, Lori. *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006. ISBN 1-932792-11-2.
8. Bristow, Joseph. "Whether 'Victorian' Poetry: A Genre and Its Period". *Victorian Poetry* 42.1 (Spring 2004): 81–109.
9. Brooks, Cleanth. "Irony as a Principle of Structure". *Literary Opinion in America*. Ed. Morton D. Zabel. 2nd ed. New York: Harper, 1951.
10. Butler, Samuel. "Quis Desiderio ...?". *The Humor of Homer and Other Essays*. Ed. R. A. Streatfeild. London: A. C. Fifield, 1913. 99–109.