

“Lucy” in William Wordsworth’s Lucy Poems

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Abstract

Aiming to respond to the three questions: 1. What is Lucy in the poems like? 2. How is Lucy related to the poet? 3. Who is this Lucy in the real world? concerning Wordsworth’s Lucy poems, the present paper analyzes Lucy’ character, her relationship to the poet and her archetype. Response to the above three questions helps readers to better comprehend and appreciate Wordsworth’s Lucy poems.

Keywords

Lucy; William Wordsworth; Lucy poems.

1. Introduction

William Wordsworth’s Lucy poems are five short lyrics referring to “She dwelt among the untrodden ways”, “Strange fits of passion have I known”, “Three years she grew in sun and shower”, “I travelled among unknown men” and “A slumber did my spirit seal”. Although Wordsworth did not write them as a group, these five poems have long been labeled and studied collectively for their identical themes and shared references to “Lucy”. The paper is a detailed analysis of “Lucy” in the five poems. To be specific, the paper deals with the following three questions: 1. What is Lucy in the poems like? 2. How is Lucy related to the poet? 3. Who is this Lucy in the real world? By responding to the above three questions, readers can better comprehend and appreciate the poet’s Lucy poems.

2. Body

2.1. What is Lucy in the Poems Like?

First, from the poems, we learn that Lucy is an unmarried woman, a “maid”, a virgin. She is neither an old lady in her remaining years nor a naïve kid under ten. Lucy is in her prime years of life. Wordsworth seems to portray a young lady who has no intention to live a married life. Lucy enjoys her solitude, showing no difference to the changes and prosperity of the outer world. To make beauties die at their prime is a common archetype in many literary works. For example, most girls die or wither in “A Dream of Red Mansions” by Chinese novelist Cao Xueqin. Obviously, the poet cannot bear an old lady or married worldly lady archetype that by no means fits his aesthetic tendencies.

Second, Lucy in the poems is beautiful, of course, at least so in the poet’s eyes. In “She dwelt among the untrodden ways”, Lucy is described as “a violet by a mossy stone” and a fair “star” “shining in the sky”. In “Strange fits of passion have I known”, Lucy is described as a “fresh” “rose in June”. A more striking feature is Lucy’s unique inner character. The poet seems to have deliberately introduces to his readers Lucy’s humble origin. To the outsiders, she is nothing but an ordinary person, “a maid whom there were none to praise, and very few to love”. She shows no interests in seeking fame and fortune in the secular world. She appears to have no worries and fears, living her almost solitary life in nature.

Third, Lucy lives in harmony with nature. She is a country girl, living “among the untrodden ways” “beside the springs of Dove” or a “cottage”. Nature, in the poet’s eyes, has sometimes become the destructive force, killing his beloved Lucy in her prime, which can be explicitly

shown in the dropping of “the bright moon” and the whole poem of “Three years she grew in sun and shower”, but Lucy seems to show her indifference to the harsh nature. Lucy can even become part of nature or she herself is nature. This point can be best shown in the lines “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees” in the poem “A slumber did my spirit seal”. To make Lucy part of nature, the poet manages to keep the young lady forever stay in his mind’s picture.

2.2. How is Lucy Related to the Poet?

Lucy is of vital importance to the poet. Lucy in the poems lives sound and safe, but the poet paradoxically imagines his lover’s death. In this way, the poet can experience death with Lucy in advance so that one day in the future when Lucy literally passes away, he can bravely embrace the cruel fact. Strictly speaking, Lucy is not totally alone, and her solitude is shared by the poet. She is the motionless figure, while the poet is always in motion. Lucy appears to be always waiting for the poet’s back to join her. In “Strange fits of passion have I known”, the poet rides his horse in a hurry, which can be shown in the line “I to her cottage bent my way”. And in “I travelled among unknown men”, the poet gives the vivid picture “And she I cherished turned her wheel, beside an English fire”. The poet creates a romantic picture of just two humans in nature living together and loving each other. The emphasis is thus on humans rather than nature. It is Lucy the live human that inspires the poet and attracts so many readers, never the nature depicted in the poems.

Actually, these five poems involve three main characters, Lucy, the poet and nature. The poet’s attitude towards the relationship between him and Lucy is ever-changing because of nature. In “She dwelt among the untrodden ways”, the pain for the poet is too overwhelming to endure. The key word “difference” in the lines “When Lucy ceased to be; but she is in her grave, and oh, the difference to me!” shows that without Lucy, the poet’s life would be completely different from what it is like now. Lucy is the poet’s backbone. Without her, the poet’s spiritual world would collapse. In “Strange fits of passion have I known”, the poet’s fear of losing Lucy seems to be alleviated. The poet says to himself at the end of the poem, “What fond and wayward thoughts will slide into a lover’s head! ‘O mercy! To myself I cried, ‘If Lucy should be dead!’” At that moment, the poet realizes his absurd thoughts as a lover, so he is in fact not in deep grief interiorly or the deep grief is under control by the poet’s realization of the absurdity of the imagery scene. In “Three years she grew in sun and shower” and “I travelled among unknown men”, the poet begins to objectively describes Lucy’s death, intending to hide his voice. For example, the word “last” in the line “And thine too is the last green field that Lucy’s eyes surveyed” in the latter poem shows the poet’s omission of his being to express Lucy’s death. Instead, the poet just casually mentions Lucy’s passing away. Finally, in “A slumber did my spirit seal”, the poet’s attitude changes into “I had no human fears”. That is, the poet no longer fears Lucy’s death. He readily accepts Lucy’s death as she has integrated into nature, thus becoming immortal in a certain sense.

2.3. Who Is This Lucy in the Real World?

As to the archetype for Lucy, different critics have made different speculations, and thus have reached vastly different conclusions. The majority of critics believe Lucy poems were inspired by Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy. Indeed, as the spiritual companion for the poet, Dorothy plays a very vital role in comforting and educating the poet. In Coleridge’s eyes, Lucy is Dorothy. In a letter to a friend in April of 1799 Coleridge made the following comment regarding this poem: “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.” Perhaps Dorothy’s imagery death inspired the poet to compose the Lucy poems. Some critics, based on the biographical information of the poet and the content of the Lucy poems, make the intelligent guess that Lucy is Annette Vallon, a young lady the poet

was in love with during his visit to France in 1790 and 1791. Though they did not get married, they had a daughter Caroline. For Wordsworth, Annette no longer exists, leaving immortal memories for the poet. Also, there are also some critics insisting that Wordsworth's peer in childhood and later lawfully-wedded wife Mary Hutchinson in adulthood serves as an appropriate archetype.

In my humble opinion, Lucy is a combination of several ladies that the poet has been in touch with in his life. Lucy in "She dwelt among the untrodden ways" and "A slumber did my spirit seal" is most probably the poet's sister Dorothy. Lucy described in the former poem is an unmarried lady. There are definitely no passionate and romantic feelings in the two poems. Lucy in "Strange fits of passion have I known" seems to be Annette Vallon, as the poet regards Lucy his lover in the poem. In the poem, the poet is desperate to see his lover, so he "quickened his pace", and at one moment he fears the loss of his beloved. Lucy in "I travelled among unknown men" fits the archetype of the poet's wedded wife Mary Hutchinson who is sitting by the English fire turning the wheels and waiting for the poet's return. Lucy in "Three years she grew in sun and shower" seems to fit any of the three mentioned above, be it Dorothy, Annette Vallon or Mary Hutchinson.

3. Conclusion

The whole paper is a response to the three questions set in the introduction part. By answering the first question in detail, we learn that Lucy is an unmarried, solitary, common young lady living in nature, most beautiful in the poet's eyes. By answering the second questions in detail, we learn that Lucy is so important to the poet that he paradoxically imagines her death at her prime and his attitude towards Lucy is gradually changing, from desperation to fear and then to acceptance. By answering the third question in detail, we learn that Lucy is a combination of the young ladies that the poet has been in touch with in the real world. By responding to the above three questions, readers can better comprehend and appreciate the poet's Lucy poems.

References

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