

Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft: Textanalyse 10/11

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**Romantic Subjectivity in William Wordsworth's poem:  
"She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways"**

One specific feature of Romantic poetry is the focus on the individual, who functions as a hero and experiences the outer world through his own eyes. In doing so, he pays attention to his feeling and develops an intuition, which kind of contrasts with the logic and reason, reigning in the outer world. This turning away from a threatening world into the inner realm of perception and subjective emotions is very typical of Romantic poetry and might be reason why throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and up until today, thousands of readers have been attracted to and can identify with the unique perception of reality romantic poetry offers.

Actually, the subjective viewpoint is what fascinates me. This holds especially true for the poetry of William Wordsworth. In this regard, his poetry transcends the boundaries of class and gender and emphasizes the commonalities between humans. Or, as Gary Lee Harrison puts it: "In elevating the value of the subject, Wordsworth's poetry – like most romantic discourse – projects the image of the well-being and non-alienated subjectivity of people in all classes"(179).

In this short essay, I would like to trace the subjective elements in one of William Wordsworth's finest short-poems, which is "She dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways". The three stanza poem deals with an abandoned doomed female named Lucy, and during the discussion that follows I am going to show that the drama of the situation is clearly the speaker's, and not the girl's. So let's begin.

When considering the first two stanzas only, it becomes obvious, that, grammatically, the first two lines are a proposition, meaning a simple statement of fact. The next six lines, though, form an apposition of three parallel phrases, all of which serve to describe the "She" in the first line. Both the proposition and the apposition differ with regards to their effect on the reader. While the proposition moves us from the subject "She" to whatever will be said of her, the apposition thrusts our attention back to the girl, the still unidentified "She".

It seems as if the apposition is a mere contemplation about the object, which does not imply an action of mind upon the object and a discovery about it, as would be the case with the proposition - it implies simple knowing instead! The speaker, to a certain extent, dwells upon the "She" in the first line and reflects upon her.

Interestingly, in the course of the reflections in this poem, the speaker becomes increasingly personal. In the proposition, the speaker has mentioned the girl in relation to her surroundings, which are largely physical, for "the human agency hinted at in 'ways' is muted by 'untrodden' and 'Beside the springs of Dove'" (Slakey, Robert: 632). In the first appositive the surroundings are human, namely the people, among whom the girl lives. In the second and third appositive, which form the second stanza, the girl is not characterized by place or by the attitude of others towards her, but rather in terms of her own person. She now emerges from her surrounding, and the language becomes more visual and interpretive also. Taken sequentially, then, the lines, from the first to the eighth, "recount a movement towards manifesting the girl, and implicitly, towards expressing the speaker's feeling about her." (Slakey, Robert: 632).

In the second stanza, the speaker uses imagery to describe the polarities of the girl's personality. The first image, the violet which is situated beside a mossy stone and barely visible, is a metaphor referring to nature and a symbol of Romanticism. She is, on the one hand, close to the earth, lowly, ordinary, accessible and part of her surroundings. On the other hand, she is lovely, delicate and unique, as the half-hidden violet suggests. The second image, a simile, draws on her beauty and her unique features, when comparing her with the only shining star in the sky, which implies something inaccessibly powerful and undefinable. The contrast between earth, symbolized by the mossy stone, and sky, symbolized by the unique star, is worth noticing because it represents her as simultaneously lowly and exalted, weak and powerful.

When we reconsider the first two stanzas, the poem evolves from sentence to phrase, from proposition to apposition and from metaphor to simile. This proceeding from abstract, general and factual in the first stanza to concrete, specific and interpretive in the second stanza corresponds with the speaker's increasingly personal relationship to the girl. But this relationship, as becomes obvious in the third stanza, is not a factual one, for the girl reflected upon has already died! Rather, the lyrical I only memorizes his encounter with the girl and gives us thus an insight into his own mind and feelings.

Given that the whole poem is the speaker's memory of the girl, then the proceeding in the poem represents the speaker's response to his memory of her. In this regard, the first

appositive can be thought of as factual, for many could have made such an observation. This factual perception changes into the realm of subjective imagination in the second appositive. The metaphor employed here reveals, that the speaker closely identifies with his memory, in which there is no boundary between his vivid perception of the girl and the reality outside. In the third appositive, the perception is not clear and whole, but rather, by use of the simile, approximate. It is interesting, though, that “when the speaker reflects upon the girl’s familiar and homely qualities he uses metaphor, as though he understands them. When he speaks of her indefinable and inaccessible qualities, he uses simile, as though his imagination falters and does not compass them. Finding no exact term for them, he can only approach their representation.” (Slakey, Roger: 634).

The problem addressed here is the inadequacy of imaginative power. The word ‘Fair’ in the third appositive is adjectival, implying that the perception is merely a perception of a quality in the girl. It is unsubstantial. Furthermore, the line ‘When only one (star) is shining in the sky’, referring to a very short period of time, when only the morning or the evening star is visible, indicates the brevity and ephemerality of these memorized moments. As a consequence, his contemplation is threatened by the risk of time on the one hand and by the inadequacy of his imaginative power on the other.

This leads us directly to the third stanza. The force of this stanza arises from its contrast with the two preceding stanzas. The abruptness of “She lived unknown” is startling, because it withdraws from the specificity of the vivid second stanza into abstraction, which, through contrast, behaves as negation. The negation continues, when “Few could know” expresses an absence for the potential for knowing and “ceased to be” refers to a fading from existence, whereupon “cease” even describes the loss of life as diminution. So literally speaking, after the girl’s metaphoric rise from one hardly noticed to one manifest, she is returned to earth, she ceases to be, and she is in the grave, that is, below earth.

What is interesting, though, is that “for the first time the speaker names the girl, Lucy, and for the first time, only at the end, he adverts to himself. That is, as the speaker becomes most personal in his reflections he announces Lucy’s absence. It is ironic indeed that between the words “Lucy” and “me” stands the phrase “She is in her grave”(Slakey, Roger: 636).

What, then, are the effects of this loss upon the speaker? As already hinted at in the third appositive, this loss is a loss of imaginative power, which in the long run is inevitable, because imagination is subordinate to time and thus prone to decay. But moreover, the speaker becomes trapped in his own feelings, unable to express himself further. The final phrase “and, oh, /The difference to me” does not involve a mind active with discovery, nor

does it evidence a revealing contemplation; it rather points to a mere state of being. And this state of being, only negatively defined as the difference from all that has preceded, is the burden that presses down on the speaker himself. Until the final word, “me”, everything seemed to recount Lucy’s story, whereas at this point it turns out to have been his all along.

To conclude, the poem “She dwells among the Untrodden Ways” describes the lyrical I’s subjective emotion in the course of a memorized encounter with a girl named Lucy. The focus of the poem is the past experience vividly remembered by the speaker, who, despite the fact that his memory of the girl is still very vivid, finally has to realize, that no matter how hard he tries to imagine the past, he is going to fail: because sooner or later, any contemplation of the past is going to be interrupted by a loss of imaginative power. And as time moves on, the speaker becomes disillusioned and remains dwelling in an elegiac feeling of grief which is so typical of romantic poetry.

Some critics argue that romantic poetry leads to a fleeing from reality into an idealized world of subjective memories and emotions. To a certain extent, this observation is probably true, as can be seen in some romantic poems, where the lyrical I is a mournful individual. On the other hand, though, one has to value romantic memory, because it is part of what constitutes an individual. Frances Ferguson puts it like this: “To lose romantic memory is to lose the ability to act by losing the ability to see oneself in one’s own past actions, to be able to recognize one’s action most vividly in a redescription”( 93).

### Works Cited

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