

Exploring the Linguistic Features Used by Wordsworth in *Lines Written in Early Spring*: A Stylistic Study

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Abstract:

In this study, stylistic methods are adopted to analyze Wordsworth's nature poem *Lines Written in Early Spring*. The poem is analyzed according to rhythm (only if necessary), syntax and semantics, which combined with the content to make clear how Wordsworth contrasts the harmony of nature with the disharmony of human society. The stylistic devices that affect the researchers' attention are foregrounded ones or deviant. Using these stylistic devices the concerned writer makes his syntax unique, his style deviates from others and his writing more coherent, readable and sensible.

Keywords: Wordsworth's life in brief, rhythm, stress, syntax, semantics.

Introduction

Wordsworth is one of the best-known English poets in literature history who spent his life in the Lake District of Northern England. His great contribution to English Romanticism is the *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1798 and the preface of the second edition of it in 1800, which is regarded as the manifest of English Romanticism. When many poets still wrote about ancient heroes in grandiloquent style, Wordsworth focused on the nature, children, the poor, common people, and used ordinary words to express his personal feelings, which is of revolutionary significance.

Wordsworth is famous for his nature poems. He believes that in nature, man's essential feelings can find better soil and can be better cultivated and strengthened. And he also thinks that man should find beauty, power and knowledge from nature. That is why he chose the beautiful Lake District where to spend almost all his life. Nature is also the inspiration for most of his poems. So in his nature poem, we find vivid descriptions of mountains, rivers, flowers and birds etc. which are full of colors and imaginations. At the same time, his nature poems also reveal his spontaneous joys and thoughts in seeing and hearing the creatures of nature, often with boyish enthusiasm, and contrast his love of nature and his dissatisfaction with human society.

All Wordsworth's concepts of Romanticism and nature are well stated in the poem *Lines Written in Early Spring*. Here the poet sits passively in a grove, enjoying birds, trees, and flowers. These "fair works" of nature, he feels, are linked to the "human soul," making him lament on the disharmony among human beings, which contrasts with the harmony of nature. In the preface of *Lyrical Ballad*, Wordsworth defined the poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" arising from "emotions recollected in tranquility" (Norton: 163). The poem is just the result of recollections of the beautiful spring scenery and his emotions and thoughts provoked by the charm and harmony of nature. He offers a vivid and beautiful picture of early spring: flowers, birds, twigs and the breezy air, while observing the pleasure of nature, he laments the misery and disharmony of human society.

Methodology

Focus of the Analysis

The present research is an attempt to investigate the style and the language of the poem by exploring the physical structure of the poem and the syntactic and semantic features of the sentences used in the present poem.

The researcher is going to adapt some notions developed by scholar Leech (1969) and since his notions are relevant to the focus of the present study.

The poem

In the poem, the perceived happiness and pleasure of the natural world and the grim state of mankind form an obvious and strong contrast. In fact both Wordsworth's use of language and rhythm help to build up such contrast, which reveals the poet's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling".

The rhythm

The poem consists of 6 stanzas, each stanza containing 4 lines. The basic rhythm is iambic tetrameter. Each stanza rhymes in couplet abab which is alternatively used. Thus the whole poem basically has strong and lively rhythmicity indicating the early spring's bright and light foot, as if nature is dancing to a piece of music with quadruple time in the early spring.

All the creatures of nature—the primrose, the green bower, the periwinkle, the hopping and playing birds, the twigs swinging in the breezy air are dancing in pleasure. Leech declaims that "rules in poetry are made only to be broken." (Leech: 12) And if the poem rhythm is all the same, the whole poem will be deadly and monotonous.

What is more, the poet's gloomy thoughts of mankind's disharmony cannot have been indicated. A sensitive reader can easily find out that the rhythm changes somewhere. Firstly, the rhythm of each stanza's last line changes into iambic trimeter. This means that the rhythm becomes slower and heavier. It cannot deny that the form of language is closely related to the content. So let us take the content of the last line into consideration. Almost each stanza's last line is concerned with the thoughts of the poet. In the first two stanzas, "Bring sad thoughts to the mind" and "what man has made of man", they are obvious belong to the thoughts of the poet provoked by the beautiful nature.

The next three stanzas' last line, though they seem to be the pleasure of nature, in fact it's the poet's mind that thinks them happy and at the same time, contrasting with his deeper dissatisfaction with human society. All these show the poet's sorrow deeper-mind provoked by nature. The changed slower and heavier rhythm complies perfectly to the poet's grief. So in the poem, wherever concerning the poet's mind, the rhythm changes to iambic trimeter.

The Stress

The next, let us pay attention to the stressed word. The stress mostly adheres to the rhythm of iambic $\times / \mid \times / \mid \times / \mid$ (\times stands for unstressed), which is just like the dancing tempo of the early spring. However, the stress also has some variations. In the last line of the first stanza "Bring sad thoughts to the mind", the stress changes into $\times / \mid / \times \mid \times / \mid$. Here both "sad" and "thoughts" are stressed, because at first the poem offers a happy picture of sitting in a grove hearing "a thousand blended notes" which makes a "sweet mind", while the "pleasant thoughts" bring "sad thoughts to the mind".

The stressed "sad thoughts" emphasizes the change of mind, and draws readers' attention, and let them wondering why in such attractive setting, there will be sad thoughts. And later in the next stanza the answer is offered—that is "and much it grieved my heart to think/ what man has made of man." From the third stanza to the fifth stanza, the poet focus on the vivid descriptions of early spring, containing both the still and the active: tufts of primrose, full blossoming periwinkle, birds and the budding twigs. The next changed stress appears in the fourth stanza, where describes the birds, obviously the active one, so they are different from the still ones. "The birds around me hopped and played," here the rhythm changes into $\times / \mid \times / \mid / \mid \times / \mid$.

On the one hand, the rhythm sounds as if energetic birds were jumping lively and lightly, free of sorrow and sadness. On the other hand, the change itself, if taking the basic rhythm as background, is highlighted. It is just like the birds in nature, representing nature's active and positive one. Though the stress changes, the rhythm is still in harmony, just as the birds are in harmony with nature.

In the introduction of *Linguistic Guild to English Poetry*, Leech firstly distinguishes poetic language with 'ordinary' language. He writes "poetic language may violate or deviate from the

generally observed rules of the language in many different ways, some obvious, some subtle.” (Leech: 5) Next, let’s put emphasis on the syntactic and semantic deviations to see how Wordsworth contrasts the harmony of nature with the disharmony of human society.

The Syntactic and semantic Features

In the first stanza, the poet introduces the attractive and striking grove where he enjoys nature and at the same time also has “sad thoughts”. The second stanza explains why there are “sad thoughts”. The reason is because nature linked human soul to her fair works, and the soul run through me and the thought of “what man has made of man” makes me grief. Wordsworth draws the phrase “to her fair works” from the last of sentence to the first, which emphasizes the “fair works” of nature.

We already mentioned that Wordsworth speaks highly of nature, here through the syntactical deviation; we can see how Wordsworth appreciates and enjoys nature’s beauty and harmony. The next deviation appears in the third line “And much it grieved my heart to think”. Here the adverbial “much” is marked. That strengthened the sorrow mind of the poet. We can imagine how sad the poet will be, while in such glorious natural world thinking of the disharmony of human society.

From the third stanza to the fifth stanza, the poet describes the beautiful scenery of early spring, implying the most harmonious world of nature. In the third stanza, different flowers in “that green bower” are pictured. “Through primrose tufts” indicates that primrose is just the background, the focus is on periwinkle, which “trailed its wreathes”. Here Wordsworth personifies flowers, the verbs “trail, enjoy and breathe” shows that the poet considers them as something full of thoughts and lives. And no matter what kind of them, no matter what role they are playing, “every flower enjoys the air it breathes.” See how harmonious the flowers are.

In the fourth stanza, the birds are depicted. They hopped and played. Here again the poet uses personification to show how the birds are in accord with nature and how happy they are. Now let’s pay more attention to the second line “Their thoughts I cannot measure—”. In ordinary life, we usually will express it in this way “I cannot measure their thoughts”. The object “their thoughts” is marked. On the one hand, it shows once again Wordsworth likes to put nature in the first place.

On the other hand, it is coherent with the whole stanza, because the focus is on the birds. If putting “I” in the first, then the coherence will not be so good. The fifth stanza is devoted to “the budding twigs”. Personification is used again. We see the twigs “spread out” their fan to “catch” the air and the twigs must be in pleasure as well. In these three stanzas, the flowers, birds and twigs are all personified and they are all greatly pleasant in the harmonious natural world.

The sixth stanza comes back to the sad thoughts of the poet. After the descriptions of the beauty and harmony of nature, when we think again “what man has made of man”, we cannot but lament. The sorrow here reaches its climax. So here the poet uses a rhetorical question “Have I not reason to lament/ what man has made of man?” to show his powerful feelings.

Conclusion

Lines Written in Early Spring firstly introduces the charm and harmony of nature. Wordsworth offers a lively picture of flowers, birds and twigs, all being in harmony with nature by means of personification. In the attractive setting, Wordsworth then introduces his sad thoughts caused by the thought of “what man has made of man” with the variations of the rhythm, the stressed word and the deviations of syntax. In this paper, all the above has been analyzed in order to appreciate Wordsworth better and more easily. Moreover, a detailed analysis of the rhythm, the stress, the syntax and semantics of the poem makes Wordsworth's style unique, coherent and deviant from others' style. The stylistic devices used by the poet in the present poem help him to remove the ambiguous referent and deeper meaning of the sentences. Furthermore, an explanation of the words used shows the literary effect and meaning that the poet wants to put forward.

On the other hand, the researcher deduces that the above analysis will profit the students and teachers of English to develop their awareness of how language is utilized to create a particular meaning, and get confidence in reaching and accounting for their own interpretation of any literary text.

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Appendix

Lines Written in Early Spring

I heard a thousand blended notes,

While in a grove I sate reclined,

In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts

Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link

The human soul that through me ran;

And much it grieved my heart to think

What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,

The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;

And 'tis my faith that every flower

Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,

Their thoughts I cannot measure—

But the least motion which they made,

It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,

To catch the breezy air;

And I must think, do all I can,

That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,

If such be Nature's holy plan,

Have I not reason to lament

What man has made of man?

1798