

## Interpretation of Lucy Poems by William Shakespeare

### Nature

According to critic Norman Lacey, Wordsworth built his reputation as a "poet of nature".<sup>[82]</sup> Early works, such as "Tintern Abbey", can be viewed as odes to his experience of nature. His poems can also be seen as lyrical meditations on the fundamental character of the natural world. Wordsworth said that, as a youth, nature stirred "an appetite, a feeling and a love", but by the time he wrote *Lyrical Ballads*, it evoked "the still sad music of humanity".<sup>[83]</sup>

The five "Lucy poems" are often interpreted as representing Wordsworth's opposing views of nature as well as meditations on the cycle of life. They describe a variety of relationships between humanity and nature.<sup>[84]</sup> For example, Lucy can be seen as a connection between humanity and nature, as a "boundary being, nature sprite and human, yet not quite either. She reminds us of the traditional mythical person who lives, ontologically, an intermediate life, or mediates various realms of existence."<sup>[34]</sup> Although the poems evoke a sense of loss, they also hint at the completeness of Lucy's life—she was raised by nature and survives in the memories of others.<sup>[85]</sup> She became, in the opinion of the American poet and writer David Ferry (b. 1924), "not so much a human being as a sort of compendium of nature", while "her death was right, after all, for by dying she was one with the natural processes that made her die, and fantastically ennobled thereby".<sup>[86]</sup>

Cleanth Brooks writes that "Strange fits" presents "Kind Nature's gentlest boon", "Three years" its duality, and "A slumber" the clutter of natural object.<sup>[87]</sup> Other scholars see "She dwelt", along with "I travelled", as representing nature's "rustication and disappearance".<sup>[84]</sup> Mahoney views "Three years" as describing a masculine, benevolent nature similar to a creator deity. Although nature shapes Lucy over time and she is seen as part of nature herself, the poem shifts abruptly when she dies. Lucy appears to be eternal, like nature itself.<sup>[88]</sup> Regardless, she becomes part of the surrounding landscape in life, and her death only verifies this connection.<sup>[89]</sup>

The series presents nature as a force by turns benevolent and malign.<sup>[90]</sup> It is shown at times to be oblivious to and uninterested in the safety of humanity.<sup>[91]</sup> Hall argues, "In all of these poems, nature would seem to betray the heart that loves her".<sup>[92]</sup> The imagery used to evoke these notions serves to separate Lucy from everyday reality. The literary theorist Frances Ferguson (b. 1947) notes that the "flower similes and metaphors become impediments rather than aids to any imaginative visualization of a woman; the flowers do not simply locate themselves in Lucy's cheeks, they expand to absorb the whole of her ... The act of describing seems to have lost touch with its goal—description of Lucy."<sup>[93]</sup>

## Death[[edit](#)]

The poems Wordsworth wrote while in Goslar focus on the dead and dying. The "Lucy poems" follow this trend, and often fail to delineate the difference between life and death.<sup>[35][94]</sup> Each creates an ambiguity between the sublime and nothingness,<sup>[95]</sup> as they attempt to reconcile the question of how to convey the death of a girl intimately connected to nature.<sup>[96]</sup> They describe a rite of passage from innocent childhood to corrupted maturity and, according to Hartman, "center on a death or a radical change of consciousness which is expressed in semi-mythical form; and they are, in fact, Wordsworth's nearest approach to a personal myth."<sup>[97]</sup> The narrator is affected greatly by Lucy's death and cries out in "She dwelt" of "the difference to me!". Yet in "A slumber" he is spared from trauma by sleep.<sup>[98]</sup>

The reader's experience of Lucy is filtered through the narrator's perception.<sup>[99]</sup> Her death suggests that nature can bring pain to all, even to those who loved her.<sup>[100]</sup> According to the British classical and literary scholar H. W. Garrod (1878–1960), "The truth is, as I believe, that between Lucy's perfection in Nature and her death there is, for Wordsworth, really no tragic antithesis at all."<sup>[101]</sup> Hartman expands on this view to extend the view of death and nature to art in general: "Lucy, living, is clearly a guardian spirit, not of one place but of all English places ... while Lucy, dead, has all nature for her monument. The series is a deeply humanized version of the death of Pan, a lament on the decay of English natural feeling. Wordsworth fears that the very spirit presiding over his poetry is ephemeral, and I think he refuses to distinguish between its death in him and its historical decline."<sup>[102]</sup>

## Critical assessment[[edit](#)]

The first mention of the poems came from Dorothy, in a letter sent to Coleridge in December 1798. Of "Strange fits", she wrote, "[this] next poem is a favorite of mine—i.e. of me Dorothy—".<sup>[103]</sup> The first recorded mention of any of the "Lucy poems" (outside of notes by either William or Dorothy) occurred after the April 1799 death of Coleridge's son Berkeley. Coleridge was then living in Germany, and received the news through a letter from his friend Thomas Poole, who in his condolences mentioned Wordsworth's "A slumber":

But I cannot truly say that I grieve—I am perplexed—I am sad—and a little thing, a very trifle would make me weep; but for the death of the Baby I have *not* wept!—Oh! this strange, strange, strange Scene-shifter, Death! that giddies one with insecurity, & so unsubstantiates the living Things that one has grasped and handled!—/ 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.<sup>[104]</sup>

Later, the essayist Charles Lamb (1775–1834) wrote to Wordsworth in 1801 to say that "She dwelt" was one of his favourites from *Lyrical Ballads*. Likewise Romantic poet John

Keats (1795–1821) praised the poem. To the diarist and writer Henry Crabb Robinson (1775–1867), "She dwelt" gave "the powerful effect of the loss of a very obscure object upon one tenderly attached to it—the opposition between the apparent strength of the passion and the insignificance of the object is delightfully conceived."<sup>[105]</sup>

Besides word of mouth and opinions in letters, there were only a few published contemporary reviews. The writer and journalist John Stoddart (1773–1856), in a review of *Lyrical Ballads*, described "Strange fits" and "She dwelt" as "the most singular specimens of unpretending, yet irresistible pathos".<sup>[106]</sup> An anonymous review of *Poems in Two Volumes* in 1807 had a less positive opinion about "I travell'd": "Another string of flat lines about Lucy is succeeded by an ode to Duty".<sup>[107]</sup> Critic Francis Jeffrey (1773–1850) claimed that, in "Strange fits", "Mr Wordsworth, however, has thought fit to compose a piece, illustrating this copious subject by one single thought. A lover trots away to see his mistress one fine evening, staring all the way at the moon: when he comes to her door, 'O mercy! to myself I cried, / If Lucy should be dead!' And there the poem ends!"<sup>[108]</sup> On "A slumber did my spirit seal", Wordsworth's friend Thomas Powell wrote that the poem "stands by itself, and is without title prefixed, yet we are to know, from the penetration of Mr. Wordsworth's admirers, that it is a sequel to the other deep poems that precede it, and is about one Lucy, who is dead. From the table of contents, however, we are informed by the author that it is about 'A Slumber;' for this is the actual title which he has condescended to give it, to put us out of pain as to what it is about."<sup>[109]</sup>

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".<sup>[110]</sup> 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!"<sup>[111]</sup> 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'".<sup>[112]</sup> 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".<sup>[113]</sup>

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 [...] 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."<sup>[114]</sup> 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."<sup>[115]</sup> 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."<sup>[116]</sup>

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).<sup>[27]</sup> 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."<sup>[102]</sup> 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."<sup>[117]</sup>

## Parodies and allusions[[edit](#)]

The "Lucy poems" have been parodied numerous times since their first publication. These were generally intended to ridicule the simplification of textual complexities and deliberate ambiguities in poetry. They also questioned the way many 19th-century critics sought to establish definitive readings. According to Jones, such parodies commented in a "meta-critical" manner and themselves present an alternative mode of criticism.<sup>[118]</sup> Among the more notable is the one by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's son Hartley Coleridge (1796–1849), called "On William Wordsworth"<sup>[119]</sup> or simply "Imitation", as in the 1827 version published for *The Inspector* magazine ("He lived amidst th' untrodden ways / To Rydal Lake that lead; / A Bard whom there were none to praise / And very few to read" lines 1–4).<sup>[120]</sup> Parody also appears in the 1888 murder-mystery reading of the poem by Victorian author Samuel Butler (1835–1902). Butler believed Wordsworth's use of the phrase "the difference to me!" was overly terse, and remarked that the poet was "most careful not to explain the nature of the difference which the death of Lucy will occasion him to be ... The superficial reader takes it that he is very sorry she was dead ... but he has not said this."<sup>[2]</sup> Not every work referring to the "Lucy poems" is intended to mock, however; the novelist and essayist Mary Shelley (1797–1851) drew upon the poems to comment on and re-imagine the Romantic portrayal of femininity.<sup>[117]</sup>

## Settings[[edit](#)]

The "Lucy poems" (omitting "I travelled among unknown men" but adding "Among all lovely things") have been set for voice and piano by the composer Nigel Dodd. The settings were first performed at St George's, Brandon Hill, Bristol, in October 1995 at a concert marking the bicentenary of the first meeting of Wordsworth and Coleridge.<sup>[121]</sup>

Among settings of individual poems is Benjamin Britten's "Lucy" ("I travelled among unknown men") composed in 1926.<sup>[122]</sup>

The poem was set to music and recorded by the orchestral pop band The Divine Comedy on their album Liberation.