

The Role of Nature in Romantic Poetry—An Educational Analysis of Daffodils and Ode to the West Wind

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Abstract: The debate surrounding romantic poetry often revolves around whether poets use nature as a direct subject or as a metaphorical vehicle for other themes, a topic that ignites fervent discussions among students. This paper examines the role of nature in Romantic poetry through an educational analysis of two iconic poems: *Daffodils* by William Wordsworth and *Ode to the West Wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The study delves into the ways in which nature is portrayed in these poems and how it serves as a source of inspiration, reflection, and transcendence for the Romantic poets. The paper also explores the thematic and stylistic elements employed by the poets to convey their deep connection with nature and the profound impact it has on human emotions and experiences. Through this analysis, the paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the significance of nature in Romantic poetry and its enduring influence on literary and artistic expression, and provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the diverse manifestations of nature in romantic poetry.

1. Introduction

Nature has long been a source of inspiration for poets, particularly during the Romantic era. This paper seeks to explore the role of nature in Romantic poetry through an educational analysis of two iconic poems: *Daffodils* by William Wordsworth and *Ode to the West Wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Both poems showcase the poets' deep connection to the natural world and their use of nature as a vehicle for expressing profound emotions and ideas. By delving into the themes, imagery, and symbolism of these poems, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of nature in Romantic poetry and its enduring impact on literature and the human experience.

2. Background

Romantic poets are all fascinated by nature and also fascinated by nature as a kind of vehicle for something else, but there are usually some differences in their views about nature when they described it in their poems. As two outstanding romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Percy Shelly both wrote many poems about nature but presented it in different ways, which captivates every students studying romantic poetry.

As a romantic poet in early nineteenth century, also one of Lake Poets, William Wordsworth preferred pure themes and plain language to show nature in his poems^[1]. Maybe because Wordsworth

experienced living in countryside and being friends with nature when he was young, he emphasized the combination of nature and mind and mainly presented the influence of natural scenes on one's inner world to express his complicated spiritual feelings. In his poems, human feelings and natural beauty are often showed in simple, plain, and vivid diction with the application of lower-class people's daily language^[2].

Compared to William Wordsworth, Percy Shelly preferred to express more complicated themes in his poems, in which his knowledge of science, his symbolism, his philosophical and political thoughts were often reflected^[3]. Shelly loved nature, and regarded nature as his stage on which he could express his feelings and even ambitions. The language he used to describe nature was more resplendent than Wordsworth. He felt familiar with strange and powerful nature force, and he thought the universe is his real home, so he was given a name of "nature's lover"^[4]. Shelly often humanized nature in his poems, because he considered human beings were part of it. And he also often used nature to symbolize other things, which made nature become magic and attractive.

3. Nature in *Daffodils*

The two different poets showed their different views on nature in their poems a lot of times, such as William Wordsworth's *Daffodils* and Percy Shelly's *Ode to the West Wind*.

Daffodils, which was also called *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, was usually regarded as one of the greatest poems of William Wordsworth. The idea that human beings and nature depending on each other and influencing each other was showed clearly in it. Wordsworth thought that nature was the resource of happiness, inspiration, and wisdom, and if the connection with nature were cut, human beings would die out^[5]. In *Daffodils*, there are vales, hills, lake, trees, and daffodils. The scene described by Wordsworth was like a painting rather than a poem. It was described so vividly that it appealed richly to readers' senses and to readers' imagination. In the description, all things, including human beings, are mixed together harmoniously. They are dancing together^[6]. Nature and human beings were closely related. They adjusted to each other to form a harmonious world. Except for harmony created by human beings and nature, nature could bring happiness to people.

When Wordsworth was young, he was positive and he trusted humanity is perfect. But because of French Revolution, he lost his confidence in human beings and began to pay attention to the relationship between human beings and nature. The more he focused on nature, the more he thought the only way of salvation was that everyone returned back to nature. Nature could offer human beings comfort and human beings' souls would be purified by nature. Wordsworth's heart was broken owing to his wife's leaving, so he turned to nature hoping to be healed. Accordingly, when he met "a crowd, a host, of golden daffodils", he not only enjoyed the beauty of nature, but also got spiritual power from it. In *Daffodils*, Wordsworth described how happy the daffodils were: "Fluttering and dancing in the breeze", "tossing their heads in sprightly dance". Here, natural things were endowed with human being's characters by the poet's subtle use of personification. This happiness brought mildness, pleasant and comfort to him. Therefore, he wrote down:

"I gazed --- and gazed --- but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils."

Nature enlightened his life and dragged him out from desperation^[7]. His broken-heart was cured

by nature. Besides, nature's healing ability was not curing people at a moment but forever.

“For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.”

When Wordsworth became despaired in the later life, he could always get cured by reminding of this experience. The memory about nature saved his soul.

From *Daffodils*, it could be referred that Wordsworth thought nature was a haven for human beings, and human beings should keep a harmonious relationship with nature. Nature could not only dispel mental fatigue for human beings, make human beings happy again, but also become a memory which would comfort human beings the whole life, especially when they feel lonely and despair. In fact, Wordsworth wrote this poem two years later than the time he met the daffodils. Through his own experience, he sang the song for nature and showed readers what was “a poet could not but be gay”^[8].

4. Nature in Ode to the West Wind

While in *Ode to the West Wind*, Shelly showed a different nature to readers. He praised nature's beauty and expressed his love to nature by fusing human beings and nature. In the first stanza, Shelly used some peculiar sentences to make nature alive, but at the same time he made nature soft and even affectionate by comparing spring breeze to west wind. Through the sentence --“Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air”-- he showed readers a fresh and tender feeling in spring. The first stanza also suggested a miraculous life cycle of nature. All things of nature would be back in spring. All things would be reborn. What's more, Shelly often described nature dramatically by imagining. For example, when he described clouds in storm, he wrote down:

“Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,
Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. ”

He combined what nature really was and what he imagined, which showed readers a dramatic nature in Shelly's mind. Shelly would not be satisfied with that only mixing real nature and imaginative nature together, he also often fused himself and nature. He wrote down:

“ If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be
The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.”

Shelly made west wind become human beings, and made himself become natural and magic. It seemed like west wind was his best friend. This expression also appeared in the next stanza:

“Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!”

Shelly made himself become “the lyre”, and “the forest” so that he could amalgamate himself and nature in spirit. He regarded nature as his intimate friend and described its beauty through some peculiar and imaginative expression. In addition, nature is not only a friend to Shelly, but also a way of speaking out his thoughts.

Percy Shelly was a freedom pursuer and had a “tameless, and swift, and proud” soul. In *Ode to the West Wind*, Shelly sang for west wind because it could destroy the old world and breed a new world. He considered this kind of spirit as a universal spirit and expressed his determination and faith of declaring war to the old world in order to build a new one through it^[9]. In the fourth stanza, Shelly shouted that he would like to fight with west wind. And in fifth stanza, he gave an expression that he would like to combine with west wind into one:

“Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth”

Shelly explained revolution and freedom by describing west wind. Under his pen, nature became a carrier of human beings' spirit.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1 Daffodils and Ode to the West Wind

It's obvious that the themes in *Ode to the West Wind* are more complicate than that in *Daffodils*. Shelly thought nature is a part of human beings and also human beings is a part of nature. Nature was so powerful that it could make living things dead and it also could make dead things reborn. Besides, nature could carry human beings' spirit and show it dramatically and clearly.

Comparing *Daffodils* with *Ode to the West Wind*, it's easy to see different views on nature between William Wordsworth and Percy Shelly. Wordsworth thought human beings and nature depended on each other harmoniously while Shelly thinks human beings and nature were one. Nature in Wordsworth's poems was usually described an amusement park for children, which showed his inclination that escaping from the chaos and living in countryside. Nevertheless, Shelly regarded nature as his stage to declare his positive revolution belief that will bring a bright future for human beings. Also, Wordsworth's simple and natural writing style forms a sharp contrast with Shelly's revolutionary and complicated themes.

5.2 Wordsworth and Shelly

The reasons why Wordsworth and Shelly viewed nature such differently are their different views on poetry's social function and language. Wordsworth thought that poets should be those men with good ability to present human beings' emotions, and they should be sensitive, passionate and tender, while Shelly thought that poets were those men who influenced society positively and even lead people innovating. Because of this kind of thoughts, Wordsworth took an evasive and conservative attitude to life and loved peace, while Shelly was positive and passionate and dared to challenge.

What's more, Wordsworth thought poetry should be based on villagers' lives and used their language, because they lived in the most beautiful place, while Shelly thought poetry should use many powerful and symbolic language to excite readers, which made his poems more difficult to understand than Wordsworth's.

However, there are some similar features about nature in their poems. They both described particular natural scenes and showed their admiration and appreciation at nature's power, beauty and majesty. Nature was viewed as a sublime and majestic thing in the two poems.

Whether Wordsworth and Shelly is different or not, they have contributed to poetry a lot, and it's very hard to define which one is better. Their poems are beautiful, alive and attractive, which are worthy of being read by all people forever. Nature in their poems has influenced many poets thereafter, and it is also worthy of being thought about in today's society.

6. Conclusion

The exploration of the role of nature in Romantic poetry through the analysis of *Daffodils* and *Ode to the West Wind* has provided valuable insights into the profound connection between poets and the natural world. Both William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley demonstrate how nature serves as a powerful source of inspiration, reflection, and emotional expression in their works. Through the themes, imagery, and symbolism present in these poems, we have gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which nature is used to convey complex emotions, philosophical ideas, and a sense of awe and wonder. The enduring impact of nature in Romantic poetry continues to resonate with readers, reminding us of the timeless significance of the natural world in literature and the human experience. As we continue to study and appreciate these works, we are reminded of the enduring power and beauty of nature in shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it.

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