
Two Interpretations of “A Slumber did my spirit seal”

William Wordsworth’s poem “A slumber did my spirit seal” compels different interpretations with different readers. In this case, two critics, Cleanth Brooks and F.W. Bateson, analyze the poem and produce two contrasting interpretations. For the most part both critics focus on examining the same facts in the poem, especially, the final two lines of the poem. However, although Brooks and Bateson draw their conclusions from shared facts, they approach the text with different assumptions. Brooks uses the method of New Criticism, wherein one focuses only on the words in the poem. Bateson, by contrast, takes into account influences such as the author’s life, his other poems and his philosophy about nature in general. Brooks struggles with a narrow spectrum for interpretation that leads him to a more biased report, while Bateson’s integration of other texts allows him to appear less biased and develop a more comprehensive interpretation.

Brooks’ commentary on the poem reveals that he is strongly influenced by the concept of New Criticism. This approach concentrates solely on interpretation through the poem’s language. It rejects the examination of biographical information, which can color the way one understands the poem. For example, Brooks reads the depiction of Lucy’s death literally. Brooks takes “No motion has she now, no force” (l.5) and “[s]he neither hears nor sees” (l.6) to mean that Lucy is dead; he does not consider that this could describe Lucy resting calmly. Also, Brooks does not consider Lucy’s spirit; he does not read any other information into the description of her lifeless presence. To Brooks, the poem’s last two lines have no spiritual significance. If he had drawn on Wordsworth’s related works he might have reconsidered this assessment – but then he would not have followed the tenets of New Criticism.

Despite his adherence to New Criticism, Brooks is still unable to escape his own biases. For example, Brooks describes the elements of nature in the poem (rocks, stones, trees) as contributing to “the girl’s falling back into the clutter of things” (Hirsch p.7). The perception of nature as harsh is Brooks’ own. Similarly, Brooks writes that Lucy “is caught up helplessly into the empty whirl of the earth” (Hirsch p.7), claiming implicitly that the earth is a place in which people can become lost and confused – a personal belief, not a generally accepted fact and certainly not an idea put forward by Wordsworth. Another example of Brooks’ anti-nature belief appears in his argument that Lucy is “falling back into the clutter of things, companioned by things chained like a tree” (Hirsch p.7); he portrays a tree, which most people would see as a symbol of life and growth, as a constraint. In these and other examples, Brooks’ own negative attitude toward nature and the earth comes across repeatedly. His New Criticism is not as objective and strictly text-driven as it would be if applied perfectly.

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Bateson analyzes the poem under influence of other texts, particularly Wordsworth's "The Lyrical Ballads" and "Tintern Abbey." Bateson takes a more positive outlook on "A Slumber did my spirit seal" because he takes into account Wordsworth's romantic views towards nature. In his preface to "The Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth describes how "[l]ow and rustic life was generally chosen as the topic of poetry because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity" (p.1). In other words, Wordsworth believes that themes of nature will resonate with readers. Nature has not been molded by society; it is untouched and almost spiritual.

Given Wordsworth's apparently positive association with nature, Bateson sees references to nature in "A Slumber did my spirit seal" as positive as well. Unlike Brooks, Bateson interprets nature as a positive effect on Lucy. He discusses how "[t]he vague living-Lucy of this poem is opposed to the grander dead-Lucy who had become involved in the sublime processes of nature" (Hirsch p.7). Whereas Brooks sees Lucy is simply dead and gone at the end of the poem, Bateson argues that her spirit is reborn in nature. He reads "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course / [w]ith rocks and stones and trees" (l.8) as a resurrection of Lucy's spirit into the natural world: "Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is now a part of the life of Nature, and not just a human "thing"" (Hirsch p.7). His capitalization of "Nature" underscores Bateson's appreciation for this theme.

Wordsworth's romantic associations with nature also appear in "Tintern Abbey," a poem that gives Bateson additional insight into "A Slumber did my spirit seal." For example, Bateson reads spirituality into the use of "rolls through all things" (l.17) in the former poem and applies the same interpretation to "[r]olled round in earth's diurnal course" (l.7) in the second, connecting the spiritual "rolls" to "earth's course" in a way that celebrates the earth.

The concept of the sublime, or connection between nature and spirituality, runs through the poems and informs Bateson's interpretation. Wordsworth describes his religious belief when he refers in the preface to "The Lyrical Ballads" to "elevated thoughts; a sense sublime..." (l.12). His references to "the light of setting suns" (l.14), "living air" (l.15) and other natural elements in "A Slumber did my spirit seal" and elsewhere echoes the sublime. "Tintern Abbey" contains the lines: "[a] motion and a spirit that impels/ [a]ll thinking things, all objects of all thought" (l.15-16), in which "motion" represents nature. In his interpretation Bateson explains that the "dead-Lucy... [is] involved in the sublime processes of nature" (Hirsch p.7), suggesting that like Wordsworth, he too sees nature as heavenly.

Both Brooks' and Bateson's methods of criticism effectively substantiate the critics' arguments. Using New Criticism, however, Brooks does not have the freedom to explore every aspect of the poem; nor does Brooks manage to leave his personal bias against nature outside of his interpretation. Bateson's method affords him much more latitude to expand and deepen

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his argument. Unconstrained from the rules of New Criticism, Bateson provides a more well-rounded and ultimately more convincing argument than his fellow critic.

Works Cited

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