



The theme of Death in Victorian and Modernist Literature: a comparison between the poetry of Emily Brontë and D.H. Lawrence

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ABSTRACT

In poetry, fiction, and drama, death is considered as a central theme commonly used to elicit an emotional response in the reader or audience. Death often refers to the end of life and is frequently related to a loss and to emotional reactions such as mourning and sadness. In the Victorian age, death has been often the interest of writers and poets with a particular emphasis on the emotional aspects while in Modernism the depiction of death is less sentimental and more concrete and factual. This paper is a discussion of the differences between the representation of death in Victorian and Modernist poetry in relation to two poems that deal with death: *A Death-Scene*[1] by Emily Brontë and *A Woman and Her Dead Husband*[2] by D.H. Lawrence. The language adopted by the authors, the structure and rhyming arrangement of the poems, the contrasting use of imagery and figures of speech as well as the different approach to the representation of death are widely discussed.

Keywords: Brontë, D.H. Lawrence, Death, Victorian poetry, Modernism.

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INTRODUCTION

Modernism is a literary movement that tended to reject the Romantic ideology and beliefs that distinguished the art and the literature of the nineteenth century. It emerged as a consequence of the social, scientific, and political changes that characterised the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and the traumatic experiences of World War I. In literature, modern writers refused the Romantic stereotypes of sentimentalism and idealism to embrace symbolism and aestheticism which were much concerned with the expression of human experiences in their immediacy and with the exaltation of beauty and sensuality differently from the morality and repressive tendencies of the Victorian society. In the same way, Modernist poetry was characterized by free verse, by a disruption of syntax and language, by a major focus on imagery, by a diminished use of rhymes and by a major concern with form and balance rather than with the emergence of emotions [3]. D.H. Lawrence's poetry had its place and importance in the literary movement of the twentieth century since most of his poems were considered at the time as irrational, indecent, vulgar, and querulous. He was a fervent supporter of free verse, rejected the previous form of metrical verse, was interested in the representation of concrete experiences, discussed overtly about sexual issues, and described the conflictual relationship between men and women [4]. Emily Brontë's composition is considered as a Gondal poem since it can be collocated into the visionary world created by the author [5]. As such, the tone of the poem appears as dramatic and passionate with a strong accent on the representation of human emotions and life experiences. The aim of this essay article is to discuss the differences between a poetic composition written by a modern poet, D.H. Lawrence, and the poem of a Victorian writer, Emily Brontë, both sharing the same theme which is death.

METHODOLOGY

This paper consists in a thorough analysis of the literary devices, diction, form and writing structures employed by the two authors with reference to the theme of death. For this purpose, a comparison has been performed with regards to the use of language, the structure of the poems and their rhyming arrangement, the contrasting use of imagery and figures of speech as well as the different approach to the representation of death. The discrepancies between the two compositions are discussed here with an emphasis on the meaning of the poets' stylistic choices and the message they wish to communicate to the reader.

DISCUSSION

A first comparison can be made between the titles of the two works. The title of DH Lawrence's poem gives clear information about the fact that the poem is about a married couple, that the woman has recently become a widow and that the main theme is the loss of a beloved person. Therefore, the reader may immediately get the idea that the poem is related to death and mourning. In a similar way, the title of Brontë's verse introduces the theme of death since it contains two words, death and scene united by a hyphen but, conversely, the reader does not know at first who are the characters

of the poem. In addition, the term scene is likely used here, in association with the word death, to emphasize the fact that something sad and gloomy is going to be performed like on a stage. This may reflect the attention given by Victorian poets to feelings and emotions while in modernism a composition is less focused on sentimentalism and thus more factual and concrete.

The structure of the two poems is different. The former is made of ten stanzas but the number of lines for each stanza is not uniform differently from the latter, which is made of thirteen stanzas, each consisting of four lines. Therefore, the structure of Brontë's poem is apparently stable, tidy, and well-organized while the other poem lacks this stability and shows some internal deconstruction which is often observed in a modern composition. Interesting is the analysis of punctuation. In *A Death-Scene*[1] there is a semicolon that links the first two stanzas while between stanzas 4 and 5, 8 and 9 there are colons. This type of arrangement, in which a sentence continues into the next stanza, is called enjambment, a device used to prolong a thought expressed previously. For example, stanza 4 ends with the phrase: 'Wouldst yet one hour delay' but the speech is not interrupted and flows into the following stanza. This is an aspect that does not appear in the other poem where the use of full stops makes a clear division between the stanzas. Interesting is the use of exclamation marks which is shared by both compositions likely with the main function to express feelings of anger or strong emotions which are comprehensible in such a sorrowful situation. Similarly, the two poems use dashes which usually determine a pause or a moment of silence which, in this case, helps to create a mourning effect, like a discourse broken by sobs or weeping. By contrast, a peculiarity of D.H. Lawrence's poem is the use of question marks which are six in number and are likely related to the speaker who is asking for some explanation or clarification as if the husband were still alive.

For what concerns rhyming there is a clear difference between the two poems, In *A Death-Scene*[1], the arrangement of rhymes is regular, abab, in the entire composition but not all rhymes are identical. In the first stanza, 'die' and 'sky' differ in spelling but match in final sound and represent homophones; similar is the case of 'high' and 'eye' in stanza 5. There are some half rhymes in the poem: 'knee' and 'seas', 'beyond' and 'land', while 'roar' and 'shore', 'bear' and 'prayer', 'breeze' and 'trees' are full rhymes even though they differ in spelling. In addition, in stanza 4 'knee' rhymes with 'thee' in the same line, which is called internal rhyme. All these types of rhymes contrast with the remaining ones that are perfect rhymes: 'blowing' and 'glowing', 'now' and 'brow', and then the identical rhymes 'me' and 'me' in stanza 8 and 'not' and 'not' in stanza 12. In the other poem, the arrangement is irregular except for the first five stanzas and stanza 8 in which the sequence is abcdab. In the remaining stanzas, the arrangement is not clear: for example, in the last lines the sequence of the rhymes is hard to detect. 'You' may rhyme with 'true' and 'too' and it is questionable whether 'everything' rhymes with 'everything'. However, the ending part of this poem does not have a regular rhyme arrangement, an aspect that reinforces the point discussed above about the interruptions in the text with the result of generating in the reader a sense of tension and discomfort, undoubtedly associated with death and melancholy. Moreover, this irregularity may confirm the different poetic style of modern poetry.

Alliteration and assonance are other sound features that are worth to discuss here. The former poem shows alliteration in stanza 1 with the consonant w: 'While I wash you with weeping water!' and in stanza 5 lines 2 and 3: 'By the slipping shawl of stars, / Could see the small stars'; this last type is called sibilance. In the third line of stanza 1 and in the first line of stanza 10 of Brontë's poem, there are two examples of sibilance: 'O Sun, in such a glorious sky' and 'the sweet sun setting'. This form of alliteration creates a sharp, hissing sound which may be useful in a poem about death for its disturbing effect. Another interesting example is the third line of stanza 3: 'Turn back, from that tempestuous surge', in which the repetition of 't' creates the effect of a person who stammers because of an intense emotional distress. Examples of assonance are the diphthongs 'ee' in D.H. Lawrence (weeping, been, keep, see, seer) and 'ea' in Brontë (like in leave and heaving). These diphthongs determine a prolongation of the sound thus contributing to create an atmosphere of graveness and seriousness. Another example is the vowel 'o' as in the opening stanza of *A Death-Scene*: 'O day! ... thou so fair... O Sun ... So tranquilly' and in the first line of stanza 8 of the same poem: 'One long look'. Similarly in the other poem, there is in stanza 3 line 2: 'A good warm mouth always sooner to soften'. The repetition of the 'o' sound creates a mourning effect, useful to create a sad scene, although the various long 'o' sounds are slightly differently pronounced.

Repetition is a literary device that is used by both composers. As a matter of fact, the repetition of personal pronouns in both poems is remarkable. In D.H. Lawrence's work 'you' is repeated twenty times, an aspect which may be compared with the pronoun 'me' that recurs nine times. This 'you' and 'me' gives emphasis to the intimate relationship between the woman and his husband as if there were a lively discussion but this contrasts with the use of the pronoun, 'he', especially in the intermediate stanzas, which creates variation in this interaction. In fact, the reader may be misled about who is the speaker interacting with, the husband or another person. Brontë also makes use of 'you' several times in the poem, particularly in the first seven stanzas, along with its archaic forms, 'thou', 'thee' and 'thy', which are not used in the other poem, an aspect that may explain a difference in poetic style. However, in the last three stanzas the situation changes, and third person pronouns appear: 'he', 'his', 'they' and 'their'. In both the compositions, the shift in the use of

pronouns reflects the difference between a direct speech, the dialogue between the characters, and an indirect speech which may represent the telling of a story or situation. Such a contrast helps to create a sense of tension in both texts, an aspect which is clearly related to the main theme. In addition, the repetition of 'masquerader' and 'evader' twice and of 'everything' three times in Lawrence's poem may express, respectively, the anger of the speaker towards the man and the importance given to the relationship. In *A Death-Scene*[1], the term 'awake' is repeated twice in stanza 3 as in an attempt to shake someone from sleep by insistence and the word 'moved' is repeated twice as well as 'still', likely to create a contrast between life and death.

The use of verbs is worth to discuss at this point. In Brontë's poem, verbs used in the -ing form are very frequent and can represent action verbs, adjectives, and nouns. 'Setting', 'blowing' and 'shining' create in the reader the idea of action, of something that is happening at the time of reading, an aspect that can be further enhanced by the use of the nouns 'suffering' and 'grieving'. The importance of verbs is also stressed by the fact that they rhyme as in the first two stanzas (shining and declining; blowing and glowing) and in the last one (dying and sighing). On the contrary, Lawrence makes less use of the -ing form: 'weeping', 'unswerving', 'lying', 'slipping', 'kissing', and 'frightening', mainly action verbs with no rhyming effect but the poet refers frequently to verbs in the past tense, especially in the second half of the poem. For example, in stanza 5 he uses 'could', 'revealed', 'did'; in stanza 6, 'showed', 'made', 'were', 'looked', 'sank'; again, in stanza 8, 'were', 'saw', 'trammelled', and in the last lines (has deceived...) apparently to express actions that have essentially come to an end and will recur no more. The past form -ed is less used by Brontë in her poem and appear mainly as a negation: 'changed not, Never moved and never closed, Wandered not, nor yet reposed!'. This last aspect may reflect an effort to deny the present situation and to reject death.

The use of figurative language is different in these two poems. In *A Death-Scene*[1] natural elements are represented such as 'lake', 'sea', 'billows' and 'isles' that refer to water and also express movement and life. This is an expression of vitality that compares in the first half of the poem and that is in clear contrast with the idea of death. This aspect may also be linked to the wish of the narrative voice that death may not occur but that life will continue. This desire is reinforced by other elements of nature such as the 'Sun' that gives warmth and light with its '...golden...gleams', stanza 3 line 2; the sun might arouse the dead person from his sleeping state. Other expressions linked to the ending of life are: 'sun setting', 'twilight', 'silent trees' and 'glen'; this last term, from last line of stanza 10, refers to a long and narrow valley, emblematic of the passing from life to death. Interesting is the use of body elements such as 'breast', 'knee', 'eye', 'look', 'soul', 'orbs' and 'breath'. The breast is in the centre of the body where there are heart and lungs as well as soul and in stanza 7 line 2 there is a battle for life: 'That struggles in thy breast'. The eyes express a lack of liveliness as in stanza 11 line 1: 'his eyes began to weary' along with look, commonly perceived as a symbol of vitality, but in stanza 8 line 3, it is 'mute' and 'suffering'. In the second half of the text, the efforts made by the speaker to strive for life gradually come to an end and an acceptance of the inevitable death begins to emerge as shown in stanza 8 line 4, 'my useless prayer' and, in stanza 9 line 3, the entire scene becomes either emotionless, 'not a sign of further grieving', or motionless as shown in stanzas 10, 11 and 12: 'sun setting ... silent trees ... mortal sleep ... never moved and never closed'. In the penultimate stanza, 'changed not' and 'still' underline the impossibility of a change and the lack of animation and movement and then, at the end of the poem, the final realization that Edward's body is lifeless.

In *A Woman and Her Dead Husband*[2], the words chosen by Lawrence to create an imagery effect are less sentimental and affectionate. 'Stern', 'cold' and 'hard' which are all repeated three times, 'drouth', 'steel', 'rigid', 'indifferent', 'relentless', 'metal-cold', 'white-enamelled', and 'never-warm' (this last can be considered a form of denial) are all expression of a lack of dynamism, of feelings and vigour and clearly refer to death. There are few expressions of vitality in the poem such as in stanza 3: 'A good warm mouth always sooner to soften'; in stanza 4: 'His mouth ... / Was always warm and red / And good to me'; in stanza 7: 'Oh, he was multiform'. Differently from Brontë, these lines cannot be considered as the poet's effort to soothe the pain of the woman because they likely represent the memories of a past relationship. Natural elements are represented by the words 'water', 'heart', 'mouth', 'eyes', 'breast', 'brows', 'rocks', 'sea', 'moon', 'stars' and 'face', some of which are repeated more than once in the poem. In fact, a particular emphasis is put by the author on heart, mouth and eyes. The heart is the core of our body which does not beat anymore: 'did wield / Systole, diastole' and it seems here that its mechanical function is highlighted rather than its romantic association with love. The mouth does not only refer to a speechless body but also to its sensual pleasure since 'I kiss it in drouth', last line of stanza 3. Other expressions of eroticism appear in stanza 6: 'And his brows like rocks on the sea jut out' and also 'Till I sank in him like the sea', but these are memories of a past that will eventually never return. The eyes are commonly known as the mirror of the soul but, in this case, they are described as having no existing liveliness because 'his eyes could see' and 'his eyes were deep'. Finally, it is interesting to compare the use of 'moon' and 'stars' in Lawrence's poem with the choice of the word 'sun' made by Brontë. In the former poem, the moon is white as the face of the dead husband, it has no colour and thus no life differently from the sun which, even if setting, may give some glow and warmth. Moreover, the sun is considered by scientists as a star but there is no doubt that in Brontë's poem it has a longer life than the stars mentioned by Lawrence.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the main theme of both compositions is death but there are evidently some differences in the way the two poets represent this human experience. Brontë expresses ideas of suffering, hopelessness, and acceptance of death. In fact, one aspect is represented by impotence as shown by using terms such as useless, weary, still, silent, especially in the second half of the poem. It seems here that any expectation of a return to life is vain and, therefore, resignation is the only way to deal with the loss of a beloved one. The emotions expressed by the speaker also refer to ideas of love and grief. In fact, feelings of a strong attachment are particularly depicted in the first stanzas where hope is still alive ('He cannot leave thee now'; stanza 2 line 1) as well as intimacy and closeness ('My dearest friend', stanza 4 line 2). Of course, there are descriptions of sad emotions represented by terms such as dreary, grieving, awful, wetting and weep; the last two ones likely refer to the act of crying and contribute to describe the physical manifestation of mourning. In Lawrence's poem the theme of death is related to strong emotions of anger expressed towards the dead husband. Clear examples of this mood are depicted in stanza 2 in a rather provocative tone: 'You masquerader! / How can you shame to act this part [...] You evader?' as well as in stanza 8 in which the woman's ideas of disguise and trickery are emphasized a second time. Moreover, manifestations of denial recur in the poem as shown in stanza in stanza 4: 'You are not he, / Who are you' and again in the following stanzas in which the speaker refers to a third person: 'And he showed it me / So, when he made his love to me'. Negation of the death of a loved one is a very common defensive reaction of the human mind and Lawrence uses it here in a very explicit way, differently from the attitudes of acceptance and resignation expressed in Brontë's work. In the end, the comparison of these two poems, the differences that emerge from the analysis of their texts, the disposition of Lawrence who was against the clichés and stereotypes of the nineteenth century, help to better comprehend the disparities that exist between the literary style of the modern times and the romanticism and sentimentalism of Victorian literature.

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