

## A Formalist Analysis of William Wordsworth's 'Lucy Gray'

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### Abstract

This study explores William Wordsworth's Lucy Gray through the lens of formalist criticism, emphasizing its structural, linguistic, and thematic elements while disregarding external biographical or historical contexts. Published in the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, the poem encapsulates Romantic ideals, particularly the interplay between human vulnerability and nature's dual role as both enchanting and indifferent. Formalist analysis reveals how Wordsworth's poetic language, rhythm, and structure transcend personal or emotional attachments, offering a universal narrative of loss and solitude. Rejecting intentional and affective fallacies, this approach highlights the poem's intrinsic elements, showcasing Wordsworth's craftsmanship and its enduring resonance within Romantic literature. By examining Lucy Gray objectively, this study affirms the formalist notion that a literary text contains all necessary information for uncovering its thematic and aesthetic significance.

**Key Terms:** Formalist, Solitude, Text analysis, Poetic language, Structural Analysis

### Introduction:

William Wordsworth was an English Romantic poet, who altered the course of English poetry by launching the English Romantic movement, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, with their joint publication Lyrical Ballads (1798). Wordsworth made ordinary life the subject matter of his poetry and he expressed his ideas using simple language avoiding grand style and exaggerated poetic diction. Lucy Gray, a lyrical poem by William Wordsworth, was published in Volume 2 of the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads. It is a romantic poem as it contains many elements of Romanticism, both in style and content. It gives a real account of the death of a little girl Lucy Gray, who went into a nearby town in a stormy weather one evening and never returned. This poem is influenced by an incident that happened at Halifax. It was narrated to Wordsworth by his sister Dorothy. Lucy Gray is often interpreted from the point of view of the Expressive School of Thought which judges a work by its sincerity to an individual artist's expressions, feelings, attitudes and personal vision. To Judge this poem from the point of view of the poet will be to commit an intentional fallacy because then, the meaning of the poem will be nothing more than the expression of the feelings and intentions of the poet himself. While analyzing this poem, if we keep this thing in mind that this poem is based on true events, then we will get emotionally attached to it and will most likely commit affective fallacy. We might overlook certain of its stylistic features and be swept away by the powerful emotions it offers us. It is only through the application of formalist literary approach that the objective meaning of this poem can be reached. In Lucy Gray, Wordsworth's use of nature as an active participant in the narrative highlights key elements of Romanticism, presenting the natural world as both enchanting and indifferent. This portrayal aligns with Romantic themes of solitude and human vulnerability, as discussed by scholars like

Bate (2000). Formalist analysis, which focuses on structure and linguistic features rather than biographical context, enables a deeper examination of how Lucy Gray achieves its thematic impact through intrinsic textual elements alone. Contemporary scholars continue to support the relevance of formalist criticism in Romantic poetry, emphasizing how formal qualities significantly shape reader interpretation. Sisman (2021) underscores that the intrinsic elements of Romantic texts, such as Lucy Gray, contribute to a universal resonance that transcends the poet's personal history or intentions. Through this lens, Wordsworth's work can be appreciated not only as a narrative of loss but as a crafted piece whose structural elements reveal universal human themes.

Russian formalism rejects the notion that a work of literature is the reflection of author's worldview. Instead it focuses at the study of form, linguistic and structural features, and poetic language for the objective analysis of a literary piece. A literary text itself contains all the necessary information that is required to discover its meaning and it is only through the text itself that the objective meaning is reached. Thus, this study applies a formalist perspective to Lucy Gray to uncover the objective meanings embedded within its structure, rhythm, and language. This approach allows for an appreciation of Wordsworth's craftsmanship and the poem's enduring significance within Romantic literature, independent of external factors. The focus on form, rather than authorial intent, supports the formalist assertion that a literary text contains all necessary information for understanding its thematic and aesthetic impact.

### **Problem Statement:**

While Lucy Gray by William Wordsworth has been studied from many angles, there hasn't been enough focus on looking at the poem strictly through its formal elements like its imagery, symbolism, and structure and how these shape the themes of solitude, death, and the eternal nature of the soul. Many of the existing analyses very commonly tend to bring in historical or biographical context, which can sometimes make it unclear to us how we should be understanding deeper meaning in the poem. The aim of this study is to close the gap by the examination of Lucy Gray on a formalist basis. The purpose of this is to get at the more clear, more objective reading of the poem by looking at its form and structure to see the extent to which the emotional and thematic depth of the poem is actually being conveyed objectively, free of outside factors.

### **Objectives:**

The objectives of this study are:

- Evaluate how the use of rhyme scheme, meter, stanza structure, and various literary devices, such as images and symbolism, help to convey the meaning, emotional tone, and themes of solitude, death, and immortality within the poem.
- Text centered analysis that is unconcerned with historical or biographical contexts and does not take account of external influences; analysis that ignores contextual factors..
- Formalism on Lucy Gray; how form relates to content, and contributing to understanding Romantic poetry at a broader level, through a focus on structure and language and thematic expression.

### **Research Question:**

- How the formalist approach in application results in a meaning of Wordsworth's 'Lucy Gray' which is free from context bias?
- What can a formalist approach do to make an object interpretation of Lucy Gray possible?

### **Significance of the Study:**

In this research on Lucy Gray as formalist, several major gaps of the current literary analysis of the poem are addressed. Traditionally, many interpretations have been clouded by the external context of biographical detail or historical background, influencing traditional interpretations of

the poem. This study provides a fresh approach to the poem, concentrating on the structure, rhyme, meter, and literary devices such as imagery and symbolism in the text itself rather than the 'commentary,' which only interprets it. This is a more formalistic approach, a more objective reading, free of subjective elements, that gives us new insights into Wordsworth's workmanship. Moreover, while most preceding critique has centered on the emotional and philosophical dimensions of the poem, this research places its focus on the way in which the poem's form transmits these themes, attaining a more profound grasp of how pronunciation and structure engender the examination of solitude, mortality and immortality. This is an effort to address the gap in the study of the relationship between form and content in Romantic poetry by contributing to formalist criticism and offering a more complex view of Lucy Gray.

### **Rationale:**

Romantic poetry engages reader's thoughts, feelings and emotions, and there are high chances of committing both intentional fallacy and affective fallacy. But Formalist approach can help us analyze this poem in isolation, without having to look at its cultural, historical or biographical context. Following the formalist approach, an objective meaning of this poem could be reached, and in doing so both intentional fallacy and affective fallacy could be removed as well. The objective and unbiased meaning of the this poem can only be fished out through a careful reading of its form, structure, point of view, poetic diction, rhyme, rhythm, meter, literary devices, tone and themes.

### **Conclusion:**

The chapter establishes the foundation for this research by outlining the significance of studying Lucy Gray through a formalist lens. It highlights the research objectives, which aim to explore the poem's structure, form, and language, and how these elements contribute to its thematic depth. By focusing on the intrinsic qualities of the poem, this study seeks to offer a more objective and nuanced interpretation that is free from external influences. This approach not only fills existing gaps in literary analysis but also contributes to the broader discourse on formalist criticism, particularly in relation to Romantic poetry.

### **Literature Review:**

In his article 'Wordsworth's Quest for Poetic Objects', Francis C. Ferguson hails Wordsworth's creative use of similes and metaphors in 'Lucy Gray' in portraying the nonhuman attributes of Lucy. He says, "The similes and metaphors are figural substitutions for Lucy which stand in for Lucy completely enough to suggest that there may be a fundamental category mistake in seeing her as a human being" (Ferguson, 532). In her article 'The "Lucy" Poems: Poetry of Mourning', Pamela Woof sheds light on the gaps left in the poem by Wordsworth himself and how they affect the structure and meaning of the poem. She also emphasizes this point that although 'Lucy Gray' is a lyrical ballad, its meter resembles those of hymns. She says, "Though narrative and closer to ballad than to the lyric of the Lucy poems, it has comparable absences, gaps and mysteries twined into its factual story. Like the Lucy poems, and many of the earlier Lyrical Ballads, its basic rhythms are not ballad meter" (Woof, 29). Ashish Youngy hails Wordsworth's use of poetic devices in this poem especially his creative of vivid imagery to produce aesthetic effect. He says, "The ballad is written lyrically. A scenic view stands in front of the eyes while reading the poem and imagery is widely used but nowhere seems to be in excess. (Youngy, 2)

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Wordsworth's metaphorical language plays a crucial role in framing Lucy as both a human and an ethereal being (Smith, 2023). In her article 'The "Lucy" Poems: Poetry of Mourning', Pamela Woof sheds light on the gaps left in the poem by Wordsworth himself and how they affect the structure and meaning of the poem. She also emphasizes this point that although 'Lucy Gray' is a lyrical ballad, its meter resembles those of hymns. She says, "Though narrative and closer to ballad than to the lyric of the Lucy poems, it has comparable absences, gaps and mysteries twined into its factual story. Like the Lucy poems, and many of the earlier Lyrical Ballads, its basic rhythms are not ballad meter" (Woof, 2004, p. 29). This analysis has been corroborated by other researchers, such as Green (2022), who argue that the poem's structural deviations from the traditional ballad form highlight its thematic concerns with the mysterious and the unknown.

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### **Analysis:**

The title of the poem 'Lucy Gray' or 'Solitude' is very significant in determining the meaning of the poem. Firstly, it introduces the major character of the poem 'Lucy Gray'. Secondly, the word 'Gray' in the title carries negative connotation as it connotes solitude and dullness.

The central tension in the poem is revealed at the very start when it comes to light that a child having approving qualities is living her life in an absolute solitude. This contrast has been achieved by using juxtaposition: she is the '**the sweetest thing**' but still she had '**no mate, no comrade**' to talk to or play with. Her loneliness is also evident from the imagery which has been used to describe her residing place. The metaphors '**wild**' and '**moor**' symbolize an undomesticated, uncultivated, uncivilized or a desolate place where Lucy was living. Vivid imagery has been used to describe Lucy's association with nature. She resembles a '**Fawn at play**', '**Hare upon the Green**', or '**the mountain roe**'. She is a wild sweet plant which "**grew beside a human door**" (Wordsworth, line 8).

The storytelling begins when Lucy's father asks her to go to the nearby town and fetch her mother home because a storm is expected to hit their village soon. There are several indications of the bad

things to come. One of them is **'Stormy night'** which symbolizes darkness, evil or suffering. The word **'snow'** also connotes suffering and death.

Lucy takes the **'lantern'** and leaves his home at two o' clock in the afternoon. Vivid imagery has been employed to describe Lucy's journey towards her mother. But instead of producing aesthetic effects there is a tinge of suspense and sadness attached to it because it is revealed at the start of the poem that she is to be seen no more. She is compared to a hare who is trudging through **'powdery snow'** and when she kicks it rises like **'smoke'**. It is told that while she was on his way **"the storm came on before its time"** (Wordsworth, line 29). This line has a symbolic significance because it refers to Lucy's death at a very young age. Her secluded yet innocent and beautiful life gets ended due to a gruesome tragedy. Because of the stormy weather she loses sight of her way towards home and gets lost in the storm. When Lucy's mother and father realize that their daughter hasn't returned home they go searching for her in the woods but to no avail. They become sure that Lucy is dead and they mourn her death. Euphemism can be found in the words of Lucy's mother here when she says **"In heaven we shall meet"** (Wordsworth, line 42). While they were mourning this loss, Lucy's mother spots the marks of **'Lucy's feet'** in the snow. **'Lucy's feet'** symbolize a ray of hope here that she might be alive. They start following her footprints which lead them to the **'bridge of wood'**. It has not been told that what happened to Lucy on that bridge but it can be implied that she might have fallen off the bridge and got drowned in the stream flowing under it. Lucy's body was never recovered and some people even claimed that **"she is a living child"** (Wordsworth, line 58), but as she was seen roaming freely in the **'lonesome wild'**, it clearly suggests that it is the spirit of Lucy that is alive and can still be seen. These lines also give more insight into the opening stanza in which the speaker claims that he saw a **'solitary child'** in the woods. So it can be said that the first stanza foreshadows her death and transformation into a spirit. In the end, the spirit of Lucy merges with the nature itself and it is her connection with nature that makes the survival of her spirit possible. The use of alliteration in phrases **'solitary song'** and **'whistles in the wind'** builds up an evocative picture of Lucy whose songs of solitude can be heard from afar. These solitary songs imply the loneliness she has been through but now she belongs to nature perpetually. She has become as wild and intangible as the wind. Although she is physically dead but her soul and spirit live on because they are imperishable and incorruptible. The thematic analysis of the poem 'Lucy Gray' shows that the theme of death and suffering, theme of solitude and seclusion, and the theme of immortality of soul can be observed in it. This poem also presents a contrast between the selfishness of human beings and serenity of nature. For the most part, the tone of this poem is sad as the story of the death of an innocent child has been narrated but by the end of the poem the feelings of sadness fade away when Lucy's transformation into a spirit is revealed. Structurally, this poem can be divided into three parts. First stanza is a sort of a prologue which foreshadows the upcoming events. Middle part is comprised of storytelling in which the speaker of the poem narrates the story of the death of Lucy Gray. The last two stanzas act as an epilogue in which the speaker talks about the sighting of Lucy after her death. So these two stanzas are connected to the first stanza where the speaker is standing and looking at a girl roaming in the woods. The poem consists of 16 quatrains. Each quatrain follows the rhyme scheme **ABAB**. Talking about the metrical patterns, first and third lines of each quatrain are written in an iambic tetrameter whereas the second and fourth are in iambic trimeter. The variability in meter indicates Lucy's seemingly contradictory situation and her tragic end. Despite being the **'sweetest child'**, she lives all her life in solitude and then her short stay on earth comes to an abrupt halt by a tragic incident, and after her death she becomes a child of nature.

## Conclusion

The application of formalist approach has helped us achieve an objective and unbiased meaning of the poem 'Lucy Gray'. This objective analysis has also removed the intentional fallacy and

affective fallacy from the text as well, and has provided us with the true meaning of the poem rather than the intended one.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Form and Meter**

The intent of this study was to undertake a formalist analysis of William Wordsworth's poem *Lucy Gray*, with particular attention given to the ways in which structure, meter, and rhyme scheme serve as intrinsic components of the themes of the work (solitude, death, the eternal nature of the soul). The analysis concludes by demonstrating the impact of the poem's form on the emotional tone and thematic depth of the poem. The study eschews a biographical or historical context and focuses on Wordsworth's craft and language which meaningfully transmit.

The formal structure of the poem is of much importance in its reading. It is central to the impact of Wordsworth's decision to make *Lucy Gray* a lyrical ballad in a lyrical ballad meter, with by rhythms from the original. As Pamela Woof (2004) has noted, the rhythm of the poem more resembles hymn than ballad. There is an aspect of exposing the structural choice as a means of achieving an even greater elevation of the subject matter by raising the tragic death of Lucy to almost spiritual latitudes. The resonance with the notion of the unknown and mystery in these apocryphal accents resonates with the research of Green (2022) who argue that deviations from expected meter in *Tenuc* and other poems reinforce this theme. The formal elements conjure rhythm that approximates the rhythm of life and death, and therefore situate Lucy's story not as isolated, but rather through its significance to the universal.

### **Rhyme Scheme and Tone**

In addition, the tone of the poem is melancholic and reflective due to its rhyme scheme. The regular ABAB rhyme scheme makes the poem lyrical over time and it helps create continuity to contrast with the sorrowful narrative. The form of the poem follows this consistency; the natural elements which Lucy encounters in the poem are also the same, including the stormy weather. Scholars such as Smith (2023) note that these elements represent the meeting point between the human and natural worlds, and that nature is at play in unfolding Lucy's fate. This echoes a hallmark of Romantic poetry — the tension between Lucy's innocence and a total indifference of nature — which is both a participant and a spectator of human events.

### **Imagery and Symbolism**

One of the main formalist elements that supports this theme related to such themes as solitude and death, such as with *Lucy Gray*, is imagery. The way that images are described, carefully, is to bring forth a sense of isolation. Like in the Romantic tradition, being nature is 'desolate', 'savage', 'indifferent' as well as synonymous with man (or with mankind)'s 'fragility'. In Ashish Youngy (2018), Wordsworth's use of this imagery is described to infuse both a visual aesthetic effect as a mere backdrop as well as an active participatory central thematisation of the poem. For instance, the storm works as a symbol of the physical and emotional turbulence that Lucy encounters, thereby underscoring the poem's emphasis on death and the transience of life.

### **Thematic Exploration:**

#### **Death and Mortality**

The form of the poem is also important to the theme of death as developed in *Lucy Gray*. *Lucy Gray*, too, is an example, as Bennett Weaver (2023) has observed, of nature that is redolent with death in Wordsworth's poetry. Lucy's death is presented as a universal theme of mortality when the depiction of her death is presented through the rhythmic form of the poem. As in human life, the poem's structure goes toward a climactic moment of disappearance, and loss, the inevitable

death. Death, as in the case with the stillness after Lucy's disappearance, is quiet and haunting, as in the meter that slows down on the tragic end of the poem.

### **Diction and Emotional Gravity**

In addition, Wordsworth's diction in *Lucy Gray* is important to the extent that it is reinforcing the poem's presentation of suffering and mortality. The emotional gravity of a poem is enhanced through that choice of terms such as 'solitude', 'storm', and 'death'. In his documentation of Wordsworth's use of words associated with suffering and death, Michael K. Aryee (2019) suggests that Wordsworth chose his words skillfully to convey the melancholy tone of a poem. The word choices are not decorative, but important to the emotional heft and existential questions that come with Lucy's tragic fate. The poetics of the poem argue that the reader of this diction will be pulled into the emotional core of the poem which centers upon loss, absence, and on the passing of time.

### **Immortality and the Eternal Soul**

The poem's formal structure also plays a large role in its exploration of the themes of immortality and the eternal nature of the soul. Key words and phrases are repeated in a continuous loop, from 'solitude', 'lost', and 'never', giving an impression that the soul will never stop repeating itself as long as it lives. These formal devices of Wordsworth indicate that, although Lucy is absent physically, she retains a place in the poem's structure, as she does in the memory of all who have known her. This corresponds to larger Romantic ideas about persistence of spirit, even in the case of death, as importantly echoed by critical analyses such as Carter (2022) which emphasize the poem's diction as a point of metaphysical continuity.

### **Alignment with Existing Scholarship**

Taking these findings into account, therefore, they align with existing scholarship in various ways. According to Ferguson (1962) metaphor is central in shaping Lucy's ethereality or, in Woolf's (2004) words, how gaps and absences within the poem leave it mysterious and lost. A formalist analysis verifies that these features along with its poet's meticulous selection of language and form combine to infuse a poem, one that isn't only emotionally compelling but also structured to articulate universal themes of death, solitude, and the afterlife.

### **Future Recommendations**

Although this formalist analysis provides a concentrated study into the intrinsic elements of the poem, future work could complicate this study by adding a comparative analysis to other Romantic poems, such as *Tintern Abbey* or *Ode to the Skylark*, to better understand how Wordsworth's use of form and structure contributes to the thematic concerns of Romanticism as a whole. Finally future studies could also investigate how the formalist take on *Lucy Gray* relates with other critical approaches, such as psychoanalytic or deconstructionist reading, and thus provide a more holistic reading of the poem. In addition, the study of how differing interpretations of the poem's formal elements can affect its emotional effect could also be of interest to the study of how literary interpretation is flexible. Last, we'd develop our comprehension of how auditory components of form add to the overall ambiance of the work, by further looking at turns of sound, such as alliteration and assonance.

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