



The Idealized Woman in Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" and Shakespeare's Sonnet 130: A Comparative Study of Feminine Representation and Poetic Idealization

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Abstract— The representation of women has remained a central concern in English literary traditions, often reflecting prevailing cultural notions of beauty, virtue, and desire. William Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" (1799) and William Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 (1609) offer two distinct approaches to portraying women. While Wordsworth idealizes Lucy as a pure, nature-bound figure whose significance emerges through solitude and loss, Shakespeare challenges conventional poetic idealization by presenting a woman whose imperfections are openly acknowledged. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of these poems to examine how each poet constructs femininity and negotiates the relationship between love and idealization. Drawing upon Romantic and Renaissance literary contexts, as well as feminist critical perspectives, the study argues that Wordsworth's portrayal elevates the woman into a symbolic and passive ideal, whereas Shakespeare's anti-Petrarchan approach humanizes his beloved by rejecting exaggerated comparisons. The analysis reveals broader shifts in literary attitudes toward women, moving from Romantic transcendence and spiritualization to Renaissance realism and emotional authenticity.



Keywords— Idealization, Romanticism, Renaissance Literature, Lucy Poems, Sonnet 130, Feminism, Gender Representation, William Wordsworth, William Shakespeare

I. INTRODUCTION

The depiction of women in poetry often serves as a reflection of the social and cultural values of a particular historical period. Poets have traditionally celebrated women through images of beauty, purity, and devotion, yet the methods through which such representations are constructed vary significantly across literary movements. William Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" and William Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 provide compelling examples of contrasting poetic attitudes toward women and love.

Wordsworth's poem belongs to the celebrated Lucy series, written during the Romantic period and published in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem portrays Lucy as a mysterious young woman whose beauty and worth remain

largely unnoticed during her lifetime. Through natural imagery and themes of solitude, Wordsworth transforms Lucy into a symbol of innocence, purity, and harmony with nature. Her death intensifies the speaker's emotional response and solidifies her status as an idealized figure.

In contrast, Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, part of the Dark Lady sequence, deliberately challenges the conventions of Petrarchan love poetry. Rather than comparing his beloved to celestial or natural wonders, Shakespeare emphasizes her ordinary physical features and rejects exaggerated praise. Yet, paradoxically, the sonnet concludes with a sincere affirmation of love. Through this anti-idealizing strategy, Shakespeare critiques poetic conventions while celebrating genuine affection.

This comparative study explores how the two poets construct femininity, beauty, and desire. It argues that while Wordsworth elevates womanhood into a symbolic ideal detached from reality, Shakespeare embraces imperfection and presents a more humanized vision of love. By examining imagery, structure, and thematic concerns, the paper highlights the evolving literary treatment of women from the Renaissance to the Romantic era.

II. WORDSWORTH'S IDEALIZATION OF LUCY: NATURE, PURITY, AND ABSENCE

In *"She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways,"* Wordsworth presents Lucy as a figure closely associated with nature and isolation. The opening lines place her in a secluded landscape, "among the untrodden ways," suggesting both physical remoteness and spiritual uniqueness. This isolation contributes to her idealized status, as she exists beyond the ordinary social world.

The poet employs natural imagery to elevate Lucy's beauty. She is compared to "a violet by a mossy stone" and "a star" shining alone in the sky. These images emphasize delicacy, rarity, and quiet brilliance. Importantly, Lucy's beauty is not celebrated through physical description; instead, it is expressed through symbolic associations with nature. Such imagery reflects Romantic ideals that value simplicity, individuality, and the sublime qualities found in ordinary rural life.

Lucy's significance becomes most apparent after her death. The final stanza shifts from objective description to personal grief, culminating in the poignant declaration: "But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me!" Her death transforms her into an eternal memory and reinforces her symbolic perfection. The speaker's emotional response becomes the central focus, suggesting that Lucy's value lies partly in the effect she has on the male observer.

From a feminist perspective, this idealization can be interpreted as a form of objectification. Lucy possesses no independent voice, thoughts, or agency within the poem. Her identity is constructed entirely through the speaker's perceptions. Although she is elevated to a near-sacred status, she remains passive and silent. Consequently, Wordsworth's idealization simultaneously glorifies and limits femininity, reducing the woman to a symbol that serves male emotional and artistic reflection.

III. SHAKESPEARE'S ANTI-IDEALIZATION AND THE CELEBRATION OF REALITY

Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130* offers a striking contrast to Romantic idealization. The poem systematically dismantles conventional comparisons used in Renaissance love poetry.

The speaker insists that his mistress's eyes are "nothing like the sun," her lips are less red than coral, and her hair resembles "black wires." These descriptions reject the exaggerated metaphors commonly found in Petrarchan sonnets.

Rather than diminishing the beloved, however, Shakespeare's realism serves a critical purpose. By exposing the artificiality of traditional praise, the poet argues that genuine love does not depend on impossible standards of beauty. The beloved is presented as an ordinary human being rather than an unattainable goddess.

The poem's concluding couplet is particularly significant:

*"And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare."*

Here Shakespeare redefines idealization. True love is not based on fantasy but on honest recognition of another person's humanity. The beloved's imperfections become evidence of authenticity rather than deficiency.

Unlike Lucy, Shakespeare's mistress possesses a stronger sense of physical presence. She walks, speaks, breathes, and exists as a living, embodied individual. Although the poem remains filtered through the male speaker's perspective, the woman is not transformed into a distant symbol. Instead, she remains grounded in reality. This representation challenges conventional beauty standards and anticipates more modern understandings of love based on mutual recognition rather than idealized projection.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: TWO MODELS OF FEMININE REPRESENTATION

A comparison of the two poems reveals fundamentally different approaches to representing women. Wordsworth constructs an idealized feminine figure through imagery of nature, solitude, and death. Lucy becomes a symbol of purity whose significance derives largely from her absence. Her individuality is overshadowed by the meanings assigned to her by the speaker.

Shakespeare, by contrast, resists symbolic elevation. Through irony and anti-Petrarchan rhetoric, he dismantles conventional ideals of feminine beauty and presents a woman who is unmistakably human. While Lucy is associated with transcendence and spiritual purity, Shakespeare's mistress is characterized by physical reality and emotional authenticity.

Both poems nevertheless remain centered on male perception. Neither woman speaks for herself, and both are mediated through the perspective of a male narrator. In this sense, the poems participate in broader patriarchal traditions

of literary representation. However, their methods differ significantly. Wordsworth's idealization transforms the woman into an object of contemplation and loss, whereas Shakespeare's realism challenges the conventions that reduce women to unattainable ideals.

Historically, these differences reflect the literary values of their respective periods. Romanticism celebrated emotional depth, individual experience, and the spiritual power of nature. Consequently, Lucy emerges as an emblem of Romantic transcendence. Renaissance poetry, particularly in Shakespeare's hands, often interrogated inherited conventions. *Sonnet 130* reflects this critical impulse by questioning the sincerity of poetic exaggeration and redefining the nature of love itself.

V. CONCLUSION

William Wordsworth's "*She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways*" and William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130* present two influential yet contrasting visions of femininity and idealization. Wordsworth elevates Lucy into a timeless symbol of purity, beauty, and loss, reflecting Romantic ideals of nature and transcendence. However, this elevation comes at the cost of her individuality and agency. Shakespeare, on the other hand, dismantles traditional ideals through irony and realism, celebrating a beloved whose humanity is more valuable than conventional perfection.

Together, these poems illuminate changing literary attitudes toward women and love. Wordsworth's poem demonstrates how idealization can transform women into symbols, while Shakespeare's sonnet reveals the limitations of such transformations by affirming the worth of ordinary human reality. Their contrasting approaches continue to invite critical reflection on beauty, desire, authenticity, and the role of women in literary imagination.

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