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3-18-2024

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Thomas Dilworth  
*University of Windsor*

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#### Recommended Citation

Dilworth, Thomas. (2024). Then, Now, and Contrasting Sensations in Wordsworth's 'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways'. *The Explicator*, 43 (2), 22-23.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/englishpub/97>

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Then, Now, and Contrasting Sensations  
in Wordsworth's 'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways'

by Thomas Dilworth

[A revision of 'She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways', *The Explicator* 42:3 (Spring 1984), 22-3.]

After integration of rhetoric and imagery in the first stanza of this Lucy poem, imagery and rhetoric separate between the second and third stanzas respectively. And the images in the second stanza separate into those of varying and, in effect, contrasting sensation:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:  
  
A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
—Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.  
  
She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

In the central stanza the combination of olfactory, tactile, and visual sensation suggests the completion and intensity of the poet's current imaginative involvement with Lucy. But the second half of the stanza contrasts with the first half. Multi-sensory interplay, solely in the first half, implies personal intimacy. You have to be close to a 'half hidden' violet to see it. The

proximity of the flower to the stone, furthermore, and the attachment to the stone of the moss emphasize intimacy by comprising physical analogues to it. And the implied tactility of hard stone, soft moss, and the delicate flower suggests closeness. By contrast, the solitary star in the second half of the stanza is far away. And because it is solely a visual image, the star further implies distance, especially after the tactile interplay that implies nearness. So this central stanza expresses contrast between nearness, which half-obscures Lucy, and distance, which fully reveals her--however paradoxical this may seem. The suggestion is that the poet fully appreciates Lucy only now that she is dead. (The notion of apotheosis may underlie the star simile.) Such a change in his appreciation would correspond to the statement in stanza 1 that when she lived 'there were none to praise' her, even among the 'very few' who loved her, including himself. The reason they and he failed to praise her may be that proximity breeds insensitivity similar to that which Wordsworth writes about in 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal'. What is explicit in that poem is implied here. Lucy's death wakes the poet's dormant sensitivity. Once he had failed to praise her, and, poignantly, it is now too late, since she has, he thinks, ceased to exist. Her death renders ineffectual the awareness it brings. The poem does not, because it cannot, praise Lucy. That this is so largely accounts for the pathos of the final statement: 'But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me.'