



Ontological, Epistemological, and Axiological Dimensions in Wordsworth's "Lucy" Poems: A Literary Analysis for Multidisciplinary Inquiry

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Abstract

Background: William Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems are quintessential works of British Romanticism; as such, they have traditionally been examined within literary-critical frameworks that stress themes such as nature, love, and loss. However, these famously enigmatic lyrics provide a dense, under-explored site for philosophical investigation—one that engages directly with fundamental questions of being, knowledge, and value.

Objectives: The paper will conduct a multidisciplinary literary analysis of "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known" and "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" using an integrated philosophical framework centered on ontology, epistemology, and axiology. This should serve to illustrate in detail how both poems function as poetic thought experiments that go beyond mere thematic reading into investigating the construction of existence, the limits of understanding, and the bases of worth.



Methods: The study uses a close-reading method based on literary analysis and philosophical hermeneutics, applying the basic tenets of ontology (the nature of being), epistemology (theories of knowledge), and axiology (the study of value) to the textual fabric of the poems. This is an approach that synthesizes literary theory with philosophical concepts to construct an interdisciplinary interpretation.

Analysis: The ontological analysis discloses the ambiguous being of Lucy both as an essential, solitary entity and a relational construct of the lover's consciousness set within an ecological system. The epistemological search brings into focus the poems' validation of non-rational, affective, and intuitive ways of knowing over empirical or social knowledge in moments of emotional revelation. Axiological scrutiny discloses a core conflict between intrinsic, poetic value and extrinsic, social valuation, positioning Lucy as an emblem of worth derived from subjective difference rather than public recognition.

Conclusion: The "Lucy" poems are sophisticated artistic engagements with perennial philosophical problems. They propose an ontology of modest and relational being, an epistemology privileging passion and intuition, and an axiology centered on intrinsic worth. This multidisciplinary reading affirms literature's capacity to explore abstract concepts through affective and aesthetic experience, offering a model for integrated knowledge that bridges disciplinary divides.

Novelty: The paper offers a new, synthesized philosophical reading of Wordsworth's lyrics, uniquely applying the tripartite framework of ontology, epistemology, and axiology in concert. It positions the poems not merely as elegiac lyrics but as vital contributions to Romantic-era thought on the limits of reason, the ethics of attention, and the valuation of the marginal, with significant consequences for contemporary interdisciplinary humanities research.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Lucy Poems, Philosophical Poetry, Romanticism, Interdisciplinary Analysis

Introduction

William Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems, written between 1798 and 1801, are enigmatic cornerstones of English Romanticism (Bontempo, 2023; Fay, 2021). While commonly read as elegies for an idealized, deceased beloved, these lyrics permit deeper philosophical analysis. This article argues that "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known" and "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" function as poetic laboratories in which significant ontological, epistemological, and axiological questions are staged. Such an approach is consonant with the NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research's mission to cross specialized discourses herein combining literary studies with philosophical inquiry.

Wordsworth's own preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) defends poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility," a process inherently concerned with the nature of reality, the pathways to understanding, and the sources of value (Halim, 2025; Johnson, 2015; Branch, 2006). The "Lucy" cycle, with its spare narrative, elusive subject, and intense emotional focus, provides a concentrated medium for this inquiry. This analysis will



proceed in three main sections, each devoted to one philosophical domain, followed by a synthesis discussing the poems' contribution to multidisciplinary literary theory.

Ontology in the "Lucy" Poems: The Being of Lucy and the Lover

Ontology, or the study of being and existence, finds an unusually strong expression in Wordsworth's construction and deconstruction of Lucy's presence (Jackson, 2017; Walz, 2007; Ferguson, 1973). She is ontologically ambiguous—she is presented through negation, absence, and potential non-being, even while she is the central subject of these poems.

Lucy as a Being of Absence and Essence

In "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," Lucy's being is defined first by isolation ("untrodden ways," "none to praise," "very few to love"). Her existence is not social but essential, likened to natural objects: "A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!" This simile posits an ontology of modest being—an existence that is real and valuable precisely because it is concealed and intrinsic, not dependent on external recognition. The stellar metaphor—"Fair as a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky"—further elevates her into a cosmic singularity. Her being is not contingent on a network of relations but shines as a solitary, absolute entity. Yet, this very framing hints at her vulnerability; an existence so narrowly perceived is perilously close to not being perceived at all, foreshadowing her death.

In "Strange Fits of Passion," Lucy's being is mediated entirely through the lover's consciousness and his journey toward her (Twitchell, 2019). She is the destination ("Lucy's cot") but not a speaking or acting subject within the poem. Her ontological status fluctuates with the lover's perception: from the fresh "rose in June" at the journey's start to the terrifying mental image of her potential death at its end. Her being is therefore relational and interpretive, existing in the space between the lover's expectation and his sudden, irrational fear.

The Lover's Being-in-the-World

The speaker's own ontology is one of a passionate, projecting consciousness. His being is defined by motion ("bent my way," "quickenings pace"), fixation ("Upon the moon I fixed my eye"), and a dreaming state ("In one of those sweet dreams I slept"). His reality is not static but emerges from his engagement with the landscape and his own imagination. The "strange fit" itself—the sudden, unbidden thought of Lucy's death—represents a rupture in his ordinary being, revealing an underlying anxiety about the fragility of the other upon whom his own state of being depends. His cry, "If Lucy should be dead!", is an existential confrontation with the possibility of non-being, which would fundamentally alter his own world.

Nature as Co-Constituent of Being

Wordsworth's ontology is unmistakably ecological. Being does not exist in isolation; it is co-constituted through a relationship with nature. The moon, the hill, the orchard, and the cottage are not simply settings in the poems but rather agents in the ontological drama. In "Strange Fits," for example, the moon's descent mimics and stirs the lover's dark thought: its motion is causally linked to his inner state. Nature partakes in the event of being whereby human consciousness gets both formed and disclosed as vulnerable.



Epistemology in the “Lucy” Poems: Ways of Knowing the Other and the Self

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge, its sources, and limits. The “Lucy” poems dramatize an epistemological crisis-how can a human being truly know another? What are the valid sources of knowing: reason, senses, intuition, or emotion?

The Limits of Empirical and Social Knowledge

“She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways” opens by defining the boundaries of communal knowledge. Lucy is unknown to the social world (“none to praise,” “very few to love”). The epistemological implication is that social recognition is not a viable means for determining true knowledge about an individual’s worth. Two alternative, poetic modes of knowing are then proffered by the poem: the intimate, close observation of the “half-hidden” violet, and the awe-inspired, distant contemplation of the solitary star. True knowledge of Lucy is a form of attentive perception that is available to the few who seek her in her seclusion.

In “Strange Fits of Passion,” the lover’s journey is an epistemological quest. He travels a known path (“paths so dear to me”) under familiar sensory conditions-the evening moon. Yet, this reliable, sensory-based expectation is shattered by an irrational, intuitive leap. The knowledge that strikes him-“If Lucy should be dead!”-does not derive from observation or reason but erupts from the subconscious as a “fond and wayward thought.” Wordsworth validates this emotional intuition as a form of knowledge, however distressing. The “fit” is a moment of non-rational revelation, challenging Enlightenment privileging of reason.

Knowledge Through Emotion and Imagination

Wordsworth’s epistemology is thoroughly Romantic, granting privilege of place to affective and imaginative ways of knowing. The “passion” in the title is not just emotion but a state of being that discloses truth. The lover’s fear, though “wayward,” carries its own epistemological weight, disclosing his deep dependence on Lucy and his latent awareness of mortality. Similarly, the knowledge of Lucy’s value in “She Dwelt” is not given by description of her character or deeds but through the difference she makes and the feeling of her loss (“The difference to me!”). The feeling of difference is the first knowledge claim.

The Unknowable and the Elliptical

She is ultimately epistemologically elusive; the poems circle her essence but never delineate her concretely. She is known through metaphors, through flower and star images, and through her effect on the speaker, but her own consciousness is never accessible. That epistemological gap is crucial to the poems’ power: Lucy can be an object of love and grief precisely because she can never be fully known. Wordsworth intimates here that the most important realities-love, beauty, mortality-are usually grasped through indirect, poetic means rather than through direct understanding.

Axiology in the “Lucy” Poems: Systems of Value and Worth

Axiology is the study of value, both aesthetics and ethics; it is central to the “Lucy” poems, which investigate what is of value, how value is assigned, and the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic worth.



Intrinsic vs. Instrumental Value

Lucy embodies intrinsic value. Her worth is independent of utility, recognition, or social currency. The “untrodden ways” and the “springs of Dove” symbolize a pristine, uncommodified realm where value exists in itself. The violet's beauty is not for display; the star's light is not for navigation. Its value is contemplative and essential. This contrasts with a social axiology where a person's value depends on praise, popularity, or productivity. The poem is thus a quiet but radical axiological statement: a life can be immensely valuable even if it goes largely unseen by the world.

Aesthetic Value and the Sublime

The poems establish a clear aesthetic value system. Beauty is in simplicity, solitude, and slightness (“a violet by a mossy stone,” “half hidden”). It is not grand or overwhelming but delicate and easily overlooked. This chimes with the Romantic valorization of the ordinary and the marginal. Second, in “Strange Fits,” the sudden flight into the thought of death brings on the sublime—that mixture of awe with terror that arises from confronting vastness or mortality. The aesthetic experience here encompasses both the beautiful (the moonlit ride, the cottage) and the sublime (the psychic collapse at the thought of loss), showing how closely intertwined aesthetic and existential values are.

Moral and Existential Value

The axiology extends into the moral realm. The speaker's devotion to Lucy, despite-or because of-her obscurity, represents a moral commitment to valuing the particular individual over the social collective. His “strange fit” reveals the depth of this commitment; her possible death is a cataclysm to him, measuring her supreme value in his personal universe. The famous closing line of “She Dwelt” - “But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me!” -is an ultimate axiological claim. It says that the meaning of a being is ultimately rooted in the private, subjective world of affect and relationship, not in objective, public metrics. The value of a life is measured by the quality of the difference its absence makes.

Synthesis: The “Lucy” Poems as Multidisciplinary Artifacts

Wordsworth's “Lucy” poems are not only lyrical expressions of grief or love but are sophisticated thought experiments that engage core philosophical questions through literary form. Their brevity and ambiguity are not deficiencies but strategic features that open space for ontological doubt, epistemological uncertainty, and axiological reflection.

Contribution to Literary Theory

From a literary-theoretical perspective, the poems anticipate later critical concerns. The ontological instability of Lucy prefigures reader-response theories whereby the “poem” or “character” is completed in the consciousness of the reader/beholder. The epistemological privileging of emotion aligns with affective stylistics. The axiological critique of social valuation resonates with feminist and ethical criticism, which search out the voices of the marginalized. A multidisciplinary analysis thus reveals the poems as proto-theoretical texts.

Relevance for Contemporary Multidisciplinary Research

The “Lucy” poems offer a model of integrated knowledge for modern multidisciplinary inquiry. They show how narrative and imagery allow an individual to experience philosophical ideas.



Disciplinary boundaries between literature and philosophy are permeable and productively crossed. Knowledge that is subjective, affective, holds validity alongside more objective modes. Value is an intricate construct that demands analysis from aesthetic, ethical, and existential perspectives. The valuation of the non-famous, ecological consciousness, and the limits of rationalism are all concerns of an increasingly mindful age, so Wordsworth's poetic inquiries remain strikingly relevant.

Conclusion

Through the lenses of ontology, epistemology, and axiology, William Wordsworth's "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known" and "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" emerge as profound meditations on being, knowing, and valuing. Lucy exists in a state of essential yet vulnerable being, known only through poetic intuition and valued intrinsically against societal neglect. The lover's consciousness navigates a world where knowledge erupts from passion and where value is defined by profound subjective difference.

This analysis underlines how literary texts are able to grapple profoundly with philosophical issues, but not through abstraction, rather through the specificities of image, situation, and emotion. For the multidisciplinary researcher, such texts are crucial because they cannot be reduced to a sole framework of interpretation. They demand, and reward, a conjunction of approaches-literary, philosophical, psychological, and ethical. In so doing, the "Lucy" poems continue to invite readers into their untrodden ways and offer ongoing insight into what it means to be, know, and cherish a fragile world.

Transparency Statement: We confirm that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

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