

The Reality of the Supernatural

Literary Theory in the World of “Lucy Gray”

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Within his magnum opus *The Republic*, Plato decrees that poets have no place in society because “all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful strains not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed.” Naturally, such a damning allegation has long since been treated as an affront to the livelihood of poets, playwrights, and authors everywhere. In the centuries that followed, writers across Europe published responses to Plato’s doctrine, including the likes of the experimental naturalist Émile Zola (1840-1902), and the gentleman playwright Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The contemporaries in question reignited popular debate over Plato’s teachings in the nineteenth century. As an experimentalist, Zola maintained that creative writers should apply their craft to probing the mysteries of human nature. Wilde insisted upon the contrary: that the highest grade of art has no utility whatsoever. But despite their contrasting theories, they enter into reluctant agreement that imitation of the natural world, or mimesis, is a necessary evil in the creation of art. After defining Zola and Wilde’s impressions of art, this article will go on to apply their methods to a poem composed by their predecessor, William Wordsworth. As a folk ballad from 1799, the world of “Lucy Gray” reflects both Zola’s emergent naturalism and Wilde’s school of aestheticism.

As a disciple of Claude Bernard, Émile Zola scorned the frivolity of English Romanticism, the literary genre that was popular across Europe and North America during his lifetime. Idealism did not fare much better in his regard.¹ As a man of science, Zola believed that art and literature should exist in society not as some mindless entertainment, but to serve a higher scientific and moral purpose. While he was never a sought-after dinner guest, Zola did make waves in literary circles

1 Émile Zola, “The Experimental Novel,” in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, 2nd ed., ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), 707.

for his suggestion that scientific methodology be applied to the creation of an “experimental novel.” According to his essay *Le Roman expérimentale* (1880), the novelist “should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human mind and social data in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings.”² Only by collecting such data on human behavior is the experimental novelist able “to penetrate to the wherefore of things... and to reduce them to a condition of subservient machinery.”³ Conducting experiments on characters in realistic fiction serves two purposes: the first, to gain a better understanding of man as both an individual and as a social creature; and the second, to discover the laws that govern human nature.⁴ Once these objectives have been met, it is possible for the experimentalist to remedy all manner of social ills.⁵ As such, it is the duty of novelists to uplift humanity by producing moralistic content.

While Zola identified first and foremost as an “experimentalist,” history recorded his dogma under a different name. His concept of “experimentalism” echoes what contemporary researchers know as naturalism, a subgenre of literary realism wherein fictional characters are dominated by their biological, economic, and environmental forces.⁶ As a proponent of naturalism, Zola believed that studying fictional characters in a realistic setting would reveal the secrets of humankind.

Although Zola would certainly disapprove of the idealism present in Wordsworth’s poem, he could appreciate the ballad as a study of family dynamics during the Romantic Period. As a narrative poem, “Lucy Gray” introduces the eponymous heroine alongside her mother and father. Her mother and father are limited to their parental roles; however, the tenderness of their dialogue suggests that they form a close family unit. The father’s behavior also demonstrates a vested concern in his wife’s safety and well-being. He instructs Lucy to bring her mother a lantern to light her way home, to which Lucy replies:

That, Father! Will I gladly do:
‘Tis scarcely afternoon—
The minster-clock has just struck two,
And yonder is the moon!⁷

Lucy’s response is clearly romanticized, rather than realistic; children do not typically respond to assigned tasks with such enthusiasm. Lucy’s calm and cheerful demeanor reflects the romantic ideal of childhood, which depicts children as

2 Zola, “Experimental Novel,” 702.

3 Zola, “Experimental Novel,” 703.

4 Zola, “Experimental Novel,” 704.

5 Zola, “Experimental Novel,” 704.

6 Robert Archambeau, “From Plato’s *Ion*,” (English 450: The Theory of Literature, Lake Forest College, Lake Forest, IL, 29 August 2022).

7 William Wordsworth, “Lucy Gray,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), lines 17-20.

innocent souls that are yet undimmed by the harshness of reality.⁸ But in setting aside concerns of scientific accuracy, the verse provides a good deal of insight into the life of the British working-class at the turn of the nineteenth century. Children were raised to be ready and willing to obey authority, which led to numerous accidents and their exploitation in the burgeoning industrial and mining industries.⁹ In accordance with historical pattern, Lucy's willingness to deliver the lantern ultimately causes her to die from exposure to the elements. Moreover, the characters' social interactions as a young family seem quite natural: that of a mother, father, and child looking out for one another's well-being. From a sociological standpoint, the gamble the family makes in a bid to guarantee the mother's safety feels entirely realistic for the nineteenth century.

The ballad of Lucy Gray also relates existential truths about religion. Examined as a work of literature from 1799, the poem exemplifies the Romantic Era's standard of virtuous behavior; it can also be read as a warning to parents not to send their children outside in advance of an incoming snowstorm. However, the ballad's ambiguous ending also remarks on the uncertainty of religious faith. Following their daughter's disappearance into the blizzard, Lucy's parents give up hope of seeing their child again. They begin to weep, and console each other with the notion "in heaven, we all shall meet."¹⁰ However, their hopes that Lucy is safe in heaven are dashed when rumors of a ghostly child begin circulating through the town.¹¹ According to the legend, Lucy Gray traipses through the snowdrifts, all the while "sing[ing] a solitary song/that whistles in the wind."¹² While the girl does not seem outwardly unhappy with her fate, she is nonetheless cursed to wander the moors searching for her mother, never to find her rest. In a world where Christianity exists alongside ghost stories, Wordsworth's poem suggests that religion cannot be treated as an absolute truth.

Oscar Wilde could not have been more different than Émile Zola if he tried (and indeed, historical accounts suggest that Wilde made a conscious effort to drive his contemporary up the wall). As a comedian of the Victorian Age, the gentleman playwright adopted his mentor's disdain for conventional mimesis.¹³ Wilde made a name for himself as the spokesperson for aestheticism, or the school of "art for art's sake." With his flamboyant dress and biting wit, Wilde's avant-garde approach to art and criticism made him one of the most fashionable dinner guests in Victorian high society.¹⁴ In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Wilde issued a series of provocative statements defining what art should and should not be. He further developed the theory of aestheticism in his essay "The Decay of Lying"

8 Deirdre Shauna Lynch and Jack Stillinger, "The Romantic Period," in Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, 17.

9 Carol Christ and Catherine Robson, "The Victorian Era," in Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, 1022.

10 Wordsworth, "Lucy," line 42.

11 Wordsworth, "Lucy," lines 57-60.

12 Wordsworth, "Lucy," lines 61-64.

13 Carol Christ and Catherine Robson, "Oscar Wilde," in Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, 1720.

14 Christ and Robson, "Wilde," 1720.

(1891), which takes the form of a dialogue between brothers Cyril and Vivian in apparent mockery of Plato's Socratic dialogues. According to Wilde, the fine arts cycle through three stages upon their introduction to mainstream society, with the first being a form that is purely intended as "abstract decoration," and the second being a stylized representation of the surrounding world.¹⁵ Works that fall into these first two categories constitute art because they engage the imagination. However, as more and more people apply this new form in a futile attempt to understand the world, the ineffable beauty of art is dealt a fatal blow. Wilde argues that "the condition of any art is style" and that realism therefore "do[es] not succeed in producing even that impression of reality at which [it] aims."¹⁶ Art imitates life, but strict scientific accuracy is dull and flavorless. Although the gentleman playwright has scathing words for the naturalists "who have invaded the kingdom of romance,"¹⁷ Wilde voices approval of Wordsworth's romantic ballads.

As the spokesperson of aestheticism, Oscar Wilde would certainly appreciate the beauty of Wordsworth's poem. The ballad of Lucy Gray consists of sixteen rhyming quatrains, a feat that both accentuates the poem's musicality and demonstrates Wordsworth's dexterity as an English poet. There are some stanzas in the poem, however, that are not strictly necessary in recounting the events leading to Lucy's tragic fate. Indeed, this added detail allows Wordsworth to breathe life into the poem's protagonist and surrounding world. The second quatrain of the verse establishes Lucy Gray as the quintessential romantic heroine:

No mate, no comrade Lucy knew;
She dwelt on a wide moor;
-The sweetest thing that ever grew
Beside a human door!¹⁸

This fanciful description of the child provides deterministic insight into Lucy's personality. Without contact from the wider world, Lucy grows into her sweet temperament and wide-eyed innocence. Such characteristics tie into the romantic ideal of childhood, while simultaneously endearing Lucy to the audience. The poem also illustrates how Lucy interacts with her surroundings. In an implied simile, the verse likens Lucy to the deer that occupy the snowy moors:

Not blither is the mountain roe:
With many a wanton stroke
Her feet disperse the powdery snow
That rises up like smoke¹⁹

15 Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in Adams and Searle, *Critical Theory*, 717.

16 Wilde, "Lying," 717.

17 Wilde, "Lying," 718.

18 Wordsworth, "Lucy," lines 5-7.

19 Wordsworth, "Lucy," lines 25-28.

The wholesome image of a child kicking up snow keeps the verse from becoming overly despondent. Graceful as a mountain roe, Lucy seems fully at ease in an inhospitable environment. While these quatrains are not essential to the overarching narrative, Wordsworth's inclusion of such storytelling devices makes the story all the more vivid. His stylized description of the characters and landscape paint a fanciful picture of Lucy's world in the mind's eye.

The style inherent to the folk ballad effectively spins tragedy into folklore. While the presence of the supernatural establishes Wordsworth's ballad as a work of fiction, the tragic death of Lucy Gray was nonetheless inspired by the high child mortality rate in England throughout the 1800s.²⁰ The narrator's opening remark that "Oft I had heard of Lucy Gray"²¹ signals that the child's story has been told many times, while the penultimate quatrain reminds the audience that they are listening to a tale that has been passed down for generations:

-Yet some maintain that to this day
She is a living child;
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray
Upon the lonesome wild.²²

Many years have passed since Lucy's disappearance, but the sightings of a "living child"²³ imply that her spirit still roams the moor. There is no denying that the child is dead; a little girl cannot be expected to survive a snowstorm, and she failed to return home to her parents. However, Lucy's fate remains a mystery: How did she die? Has her spirit really returned to walk the earth? In the absence of answers, kin are left to their own devices to process what happened. The rumors circulating through town are only rumors.²⁴ But regardless of whether the tale is meant to be believed, the ballad of Lucy Gray exists in a world wherein folktales provide comfort in the aftermath of tragedy. Lucy's legend lives on as a whisper in the wind.

For millennia, Plato's dogma has sparked arguments regarding how the world should be represented in literature. While some writers elect to adapt the philosopher's standard of accuracy into their work, others vehemently protest his dismissal of fantasy and fiction. This dispute eventually led to the rivalry of Émile Zola and Oscar Wilde in the nineteenth century. The world depicted in "the Ballad of Lucy Gray," however, appeals both to Zola's experimental naturalism and Wilde's brand of aestheticism. The ballad's narrative detail provides ample opportunity for sociological study, while simultaneously engaging the imagination with aesthetic beauty and style. While Zola and Wilde never saw eye-to-eye regarding the intended

20 Christ and Robson, "Victorian Era," 1022.

21 Wordsworth, "Lucy," line 1.

22 Wordsworth, "Lucy," lines 57-60.

23 Wordsworth, "Lucy," line 58.

24 Wordsworth, "Lucy," lines 57-60.

purpose of art, they concur that imitation of the world, with all of its mysteries and madness, is necessary in its creation. The ballad of Lucy Gray stands at the crossroads of function and beauty, thus ensuring its longevity within the canon of English poetry.