

Silence in Wordsworth's “The Last of the Flock”

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Many poems included in the *Lyrical Ballads* depict the struggles of ordinary people in a predicament. In poems like “The Female Vagrant,” “The Mad Mother,” “The Thorn,” “The Last of the Flock,” and “Michael,” people cope with their hardships in different ways to try and change their lot in life, even though they are eventually overwhelmed by their fate. In these poems, silence plays a crucial role in conveying people’s distress and the difficult situations faced by them, while at the same time suggesting economic and social changes happening in the background.

In this paper, I would like to focus on “The Last of the Flock” and analyse the effects of silence or gaps in the poem. I have chosen this poem because it raises some questions and critical issues about the events and people which it depicts. While “Michael” and other poems describe the changes undergone by their protagonists and their reactions to these events in a more persuasive way, “The Last of the Flock” gives us a very simple picture of the event. In my discussion, comparison with “Michael” would be helpful, as both poems describe lives of shepherds who had to make a hard choice between parental affection

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to one's children and love of property.

“The Last of the Flock” has three important silences or gaps that readers must fill. The first gap is the cause of the shepherd's financial difficulty, the second is his affection for his children, and the third is the reaction of the narrator of the poem to the shepherd's tale.

In the opening lines of “The Last of the Flock,” the narrator explains an unusual scene he comes across on a road :

In distant countries I have been,
And yet I have not often seen
A healthy man, a man full grown,
Weep in the public roads alone.¹

He expresses his surprise at encountering a man openly crying by a highway in England. The man holds a lamb in his arms. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to this man as the “the shepherd” in order to distinguish him from the narrator of the poem. When the shepherd notices that the narrator is watching him, he seems to be ashamed and wipes his tears. The narrator follows the shepherd and asks him why he is crying. Then the man begins his story.

According to the shepherd, he bought a ewe when he was a young, single man. The ewe gave birth to a sheep. When the shepherd got married, the number of sheep increased to twenty and, eventually, fifty. As the number of sheep increased, his family grew and thrived. This was the time in his life

¹ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* (Bristol : Cottle, 1798), 133.

when he was happiest. However, for some unexplained reason, he had to resort to selling his sheep in order to support his family :

Ten children, Sir! had I to feed,
Hard labour in a t'me of need!²

When he appealed to his parish for relief, his appeal was denied as he was a "wealthy" man who owned fifty sheep. Following this, he sold one of his sheep and bought bread for his children, who became healthy after eating the bread. Since then, he had to sell his sheep one by one until the sheep he held in his arms when the narrator found him was the last one.

The first gap we have to fill in the poem is the cause of the shepherd's economic difficulty. Obviously, to raise ten children is a burden, but in this poem, it is not made clear exactly what gives rise to his "t'me of need." Although there is no explanation about the period in which the poem is set, when we consider the historical background of the 1790s, when the poem was written and published, we can surmise that his "need" was caused by the rise in bread prices in the mid-1790s. England had been fighting against revolutionary France since 1793, and grain imports had become unreliable. In addition, England experienced poor harvests in 1792, 1794, 1795, and 1796. Under these circumstances, the price of wheat more than doubled from 1792 to 1795,³ and several measures such as the "Speenhamland System" were implemented to give relief to poor people. The Speenhamland System was a system for warrant-

² Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 135.

³ W. E. Minchinton, "Agricultural Returns and the Government during the Napoleonic Wars," *Agricultural History Review* 1 (1953) : 29.

ing a certain standard of income calculated according to the price of bread and the size of the family. It was the responsibility of the local parish to ensure that the system was enforced. Poor relief was a major issue in the 1790s.

Although the shepherd in “The Last of the Flock” does not mention any particular cause for his financial problems, this rise in price levels of daily essentials can be assumed to be the cause of the “need” which impelled him to appeal to the parish for aid and sell his sheep after the appeal was denied.

In the case of “Michael,” the cause of Michael’s problem is clearly explained in the poem : he had stood security for his nephew’s debt. The nephew was a wealthy man, but because of some misfortune, he encountered financial difficulties and Michael had to pay off his debt. To do this, he had to sell half of the land inherited from his ancestor or send his son Luke to the city to earn money.

I would like to consider the effect of the shepherd’s silence about the cause of his financial difficulty in “The Last of the Flock.” On the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that, as contemporaries, the shepherd and the narrator call the rise in bread price to mind. On the other hand, by not mentioning the exact cause of the shepherd’s difficulty, “The Last of the Flock” was able to address the more general predicament of man.

The second important gap in the poem is the shepherd’s parental affection for his children. When he sells his first sheep, he buys bread for his children, and this bread makes them healthy. It is natural to expect that, as a father, the shepherd would be relieved to see his children recovering their good health. However, the following lines suggest otherwise :

I sold a sheep as they had said,

And bought my little children bread,
 And they were healthy with their food ;
 For me it never did me good.⁴

The last line of the quotation reveals that his regret over losing his sheep overshadows his parental affection.

The expression of his regret over the sheep decreasing in number seems rather shocking when he explains that his affection for children is in direct proportion to his wealth :

Sir! 'twas a precious flock to me,
 As dear as my own children be ;
 For daily with my growing store
 I loved my children more and more
 Alas! it was an evil time ;
 God cursed me in my sore distress,
 I prayed, yet every day I thought
 I loved my children less ;
 And every week, and every day,
 My flock, it seemed to melt away.⁵

In the second line of this quotation, he states that his sheep are as "dear" to him as his own children, and his affection for his children decreases with the decrease in the number of sheep. Thus, the shepherd conveys the impression

⁴ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 136.

⁵ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 137.

that his sheep—which are essentially his property—are more important than his children.

When we compare the shepherd's sentiment with Michael's, it seems undeniable that his attachment to his property is odd. When Michael has to make a decision about sending his son Luke to the city, he decides that Luke will go but changes his mind five days later. Troubled in his sleep, Michael says to Luke as follows :

. . . Thou must not go :
We have no other Child but thee to lose,
None to remember—do not go away,
For if thou leave thy Father he will die.⁶

After this, Michael changes his mind again and eventually Luke leaves Michael. Michael's emotions when making this hard decision are described in delicate detail. In "Michael," Wordsworth successfully presents "a picture of a man, of strong mind and lively sensibility, agitated by two of the most powerful affections of the human heart : the parental affection, and the love of property, landed property, including the feelings of inheritance, home, and personal and family independence."⁷ While parental affection is fully illustrated in "Michael," "The Last of the Flock" gives an incomplete picture of it. I would like to consider the reason for this.

⁶ William Wordsworth, *Complete Poetical Works*. ed. Thomas Hutchinson. rev. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1936) 107–08.

⁷ William Wordsworth, Vol. 1 of *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*. 2nd. ed. ed. Ernest de Selincours. rev. Alan G. Hill (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 2000) 322.

I believe that the shepherd has feelings of parental affection and responsibility toward his children. This is the reason he sells his sheep one by one in order to support his family. However, these feelings are overshadowed by his desperate expression to the narrator of his attachment to the sheep, which is prompted by this crucial moment of selling the last of his flock. This frantic expression of sentiment expresses the frank emotion of a man who cannot do anything to change his lot in life and is thus at a loss. The poet describes an aspect of human nature through this rather extreme picture of the shepherd.

Another significant instance of silence in "The Last of the Flock" is at the end of the poem. The following are the concluding lines of this poem :

And of my fifty, yesterday
 I had but only one,
 And here it lies upon my arm,
 Alas! and I have none ;
 To-day I fetched it from the rock ;
 It is the last of all my flock.⁸

This is the end of the shepherd's impassioned explanation of his situation to the narrator. After this, there is only silence. In the case of another poem in the *Lyrical Ballads*, "The Female Vagrant," the narrator of the poem takes over the narrative of the woman and concludes the poem by explaining the reason for her inability to continue her tale :

⁸ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 138.

Oh! tell me whither—for no earthly friend
Have I.—She ceased, and weeping turned away,
As if because her tale was at an end
She wept ; —because she had no more to say
Of that perpetual weight which on her spirit lay.⁹

Given the analysis made by the narrator of this poem, readers do not have to make their own interpretations. Additionally, in the case of “Michael,” the narrator concludes the poem by explaining the changes that took place after Michael’s death. However, with “The Last of the Flock,” readers are left with no instruction as to how to interpret the shepherd’s story. The narrator’s silence might imply his inability to grasp the entirety of the shepherd’s story, and his difficulty in coming up with an interpretation. This abrupt ending of the poem forces readers to come up with their own interpretation and moral of the shepherd’s story.

I believe that these silences and gaps are devices which encourage readers to form a whole picture of the shepherd’s story. Actually, this poem is based on a man that Thomas Poole, a friend of Wordsworth, saw on a road. Wordsworth himself did not meet the man, but he imagined the story of his life and composed the poem. I would suggest that Wordsworth is attempting to encourage readers to go through the similar process through this poem. As Heidi Snow has pointed out, in about five years to 18th June 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth recorded fifteen poor people on the road, and twenty people who visited Dove Cottage asking for some aid in her journal.¹⁰ So it was not uncommon to see

⁹ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 84.

¹⁰ Heidi J. Snow, “William Wordsworth’s Definition of Poverty” *Romanticism and Victori-*

poor people on the road. The poet is suggesting that we can understand how people make some positive change by imagining the background of such people.

As Wordsworth explained to Charles James Fox, he was concerned with "a rapid decay of the domestic affections among the lower orders of society."¹¹ He thought that one cause of it lies in their losing property. "The Last of the Flock," which describes a man whose affection to children diminishes as he loses his property, is a poem which embodies his idea in an exaggerated way.

It also suggests the need for measures to save people before they end up in penury. The reaction of the parish people to the shepherd was a reasonable one. But by giving some help while they have some property, they can keep their independence and domestic affection. In the narrative of the "The Last of the Flock," which emphasizes the importance of sheep to the shepherd, this poem describes the weakness of human nature in times of distress. As the following lines suggest, the shepherd in the poem seems to be an ordinary man whom one could encounter anytime in one's life :

When I was young, a single man,
 And after youthful follies ran,
 Though little given to care and thought,
 Yet, so it was, as ewe I bought¹²

anism on the Net 56 (2009) no page number. Accessed December 15, 2014. doi : 10.7202/1001098ar

¹¹ Wordsworth, *Letters*, 260.

¹² Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 134.

Different from Michael, who is characterized by his extraordinary mental and physical strength, the shepherd appears in the *Lyrical Ballads* as a representative of common people. The act of crying in public is peculiar, but this is because he is in a critical situation where he stands to lose all his means of supporting himself. What happened to the shepherd might seem to be unusual, but the poet seems to suggest that it can happen to anyone.

Through the use of silence in “The Last of the Flock,” Wordsworth encourages readers think about the mechanisms in society and human nature which can eventually lead a man to misfortune. Thus, this poem poses questions by its silences.

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