

Romanticism in 19th century poetry

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When Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "Talk not of wasted affection; affection never was wasted," he expressed a romantic ideal ever-present in nineteenth century poetry: the ideal that naive romantic love should be valued above all else. This ideal has persisted to the present, presenting itself in innumerable pop songs and romantic comedies; working itself so deeply into the psychology of Western culture that those unaffected may consider it a cult.

In the nineteenth century, this romanticising of young love was often imbued with a languid, yearning quality; and this quality was often invoked by combining these ideals with another popular theme in Victorian poetry: the mystery and romance surrounding death. In nineteenth century romantic poetry, young love was such a serious, all-consuming quality that sometimes suicide was an acceptable, or nearly acceptable, way of dealing with the ensuing heartbreak.

While A. E. Housman's 1896 poem "When I was One-And-Twenty" does not glorify -or even discuss- suicide, it fits perfectly into this romantic tradition; weighing itself down with the seriousness of youthful heartbreak. In this poem, a twenty-two year old man remembers advice he was given by an old man when he was twenty-one regarding the perils of love, and mourns the ensuing heartbreak that came from not heeding this advice.

Housman, who was in his late thirties when he composed this poem (neither elderly nor especially elderly), is celebrating the tragic beauty and rawness associated with losing one's first love, imbuing the situation with an elegance and languor which admiring readers can happily relate to their own

experiences. In doing so, however, he is opening himself up to the criticisms of objective and seasoned observers who – although they probably remember going through these experiences themselves – are experienced enough to know that heartbreak is neither the most distressing nor disabling part of human experience.

Consequently, Housman's work has inspired many parodies. Hugh Kingsmill's "What, Still Alive At Twenty-two?", written shortly after the first world war, was so good that Housman himself pronounced it the best parody of his work. This poem -which eschews the romanticism of late Victorian poetry for a more grizzled, earthy take on young love- warps Housman's themes, form and linguistic structures to create a more hardened, but also more democratic and realistic viewpoint; a viewpoint which happily captures the socio-political changes in postwar Britain.

As Housman's theme of the perils of youthful heartbreak is replaced by Kingsmill's mockery and warning about the perils of taking oneself and one's romantic problems too seriously, there are a number of other thematic differences between the two poems. First of all, in Kingsmill's parody the love interest is female and the subject is male, making the poem about a socially condoned, heterosexual relationship. Housman does not specify the gender of the love interest and, given that Housman was homosexual, it's very easy to interpret a secretiveness and awkwardness about discussing the nature of this relationship openly.

Given the degree of persecution of homosexuals experienced in Victorian Britain, this theme of hidden, suppressed love adds a heaviness the original

poem that would be ill-suited to a parody. Kingsmill's parody, however, also has a dark theme hidden beneath its glib surface; the idea that brutality and violence is an everyday, familiar occurrence that should be understood and accepted, but not made worse through self-destruction or endless mulling over minor personal tragedies.

Kingsmill is writing a missive from a world that lies in ruins, for an audience that has witnessed and come to terms with the darker aspects of life.

Kingsmill's new theme is about the power of humour to overcome tragedy, and about how we must not choose not to dwell on personal tragedy. It's an uplifting and wise theme, but one that came at enormous personal and social cost; it's a hymn to the loss of innocence. There are also significant differences in structure and form, which play on this thematic difference.

Kingsmill's poem is shorter - three stanzas of four lines each, twelve lines in total- While Housman's sixteen line poem is longer and has two stanzas of eight lines each. This drawing together of lines gives Housman's poem the sense of being more drawn out and serious, as it requires more effort to read. This effect is compounded in the differences in rhyme schemes; Kingsmill writes his poem in rhyming couplets (AABB -for example, "hard to slit" and "swing for it", "lad" and "glad") while Housman uses alternated rhyming pairs.

This gives Kingsmill's parody the feel of popular verse- somewhat like a set of limericks or short ballad - while Kingsmill's use of alternating rhyme scheme (ABCB) evokes the feel of classic verse. Both poems rely on iambic verse but -counter to expectations- Kingsmill's parody has longer lines,

written in tetrameter to preserve the feel of popular verse and to allow him to write in conversational speech. Housman's original has shorter lines with an alternating scheme of seven and six syllables per line.

Even though these are shorter, they feel more formal and controlled, and add to the weightiness of the original verse. Also, Housman has also chosen to write his poem using the first person. This makes good sense, because his poem is discussing a matter of the heart, which will sound much more personal and heartfelt if we are close to the narrator, so close we can feel his heartbreak. Writing his poem in second or third person would destroy this sense of intimacy.

Kingsmill is writing his poem in second person, from the perspective of an older person who disapproves of the younger man's cheap sentiment. This creates an intentional distance between the audience and the poem's subject matter; in Kingsmill's parody, you are not expected to feel for the melodramatic young man but instead laugh at how mawkish and overblown his reaction is. The difference in language and imagery between the two poems is startling, and the source of much of the parody's humour.

In Housman's original poem the language is elegant and decorative, possibly even to the point of pretension; Even when reporting popular speech, he relies on poetic conceits like the use of "tis" for "it is" and an eagerness to distort language into flowery, old fashioned structures which evoke a sense of both the past and the dialects of rustic England, but don't precisely sound like either. To this, he adds elegant classical imagery that would not offend

the delicate sensibility of female readers, describing “ crowns”, “ pearls” and “ sighs”, as well as mentioning the word “ heart” twice.

His poem reflects popular middle class Victorian fantasy about the past as a gentle Arcadia where even farmers are loath to talk about rutting animals and slaughter, favouring instead talk about majestic finery and delicate romantic sensibilities, warning their audience that giving away their affection to a romantic partner will result in their heart being “... sold for endless rue. ” Even when he uses the word “ lad”, in the title of the poem (“ A Shropshire Lad” , it sounds ill-placed because it doesn’t fit well alongside the classical sounding prose.

In short, it’s intended to be a fantasy, in the same way that the heroine or hero in a contemporary romance movie might not realise his or her feelings for their true love until just before their partner is about to get on the plane. This poem was never intended to be realistic. Kingmill’s parody sharply contrasts with Housman’s intentionally flowery prose. First of all, Kingsmill use of colloquial speech is more realistic and accurate; he uses phrases like “ clean, upstanding chap” and “ slit your throat,” which remove the poem’s “ high art” status and place it in the workaday world of ordinary people.

He echoes Housman’s use of the word “ tis”, but only once, and he misuses it, (possibly intentionally) mistaking it to mean “ is” instead of “ it is” but, unlike Housman, when he uses the word “ lad” it sounds natural. It’s easy to read into this a sense of working class pride; the narrator has witnessed the travails of everyday life, chosen to embrace the language of the people around him, and is confident that his knowledge and experience is at least as

worthwhile and well informed as the upper or middle class dandy from Housman's original poem.

Even if it's used for the sake of humour, this deliberate subverting and challenging of high culture by common people carries with it a sense of empowerment. It also may be read as reflecting class interaction in the trenches, where young men from all social stratas were brought together for a common goal, but still given promotions based on their class status; the humour found in this poem is very similar to the type of mocking humour the lower ranked soldiers would use to maintain their self-respect and class identity.

Added to this, Kingsmill's imagery is much more violent and earthy. Unlike Housman, the narrator in Kingsmill's poem does not shy away from discussion of slit throat, or violence against women ("Slit your girl's [throat]"). He also evokes the image of a public hanging and an army of young men slitting their throats in unison, which are both darkly humorous and contrast with the much more trivial matter of first heartbreak, sending home the message that a broken heart is not so bad. Everything is exaggerated and mocking, even the title ("What, Still Alive at Twenty-two?") in which an older man is making fun of a younger man's undeserved world-weariness. In the eyes of Kingsmill's narrator, the narrator of Housman's poem hasn't earned the right to act that way. Housman's narrator - and much of his audience - have earned this right, as they quickly learnt to adapt to loss of healthy young lives as an everyday occurrence, and

the terror of living every day alongside the fear of invasion, bombshells and the inevitable deaths of members of your community.

Housman's audience had earned this right, but they had also earned wisdom, learning that humour was a better way to deal with life's inescapable sadness. And, if you buy into Kingsmill's view, the killing blow to Housman's poem is the destruction of majesty, replacing majestic images of "sighs" and "rubies" with images of slit throats, "blotting-pad(s)," and bacon "... hanging from a string" in the manner of a corpse.

Once you remove the lyrical beauty of Housman's poem, replacing it with prosaic images, then you have to evaluate the argument of the first poem's narrator on its merits alone. And, Kingsmill's narrator suggests, is a twenty two year old pretending to be permanently scarred and world-wise merely because he has experienced heartbreak really such a compelling argument, especially in a world where so much violence and horror exists? A heart-broken youth might argue differently, but most older people are likely to argue it isn't.

In closing, does Kingsmill's parody offer a killing blow to Housman's poem? Is it right to discount the tragic beauty of a (relatively) innocent person's heartbreak merely because the world holds so many compelling horrors? Saying that either poem has more merit than the other is to dismiss the duality of human experience - a duality which reading both poems will allow you to experience beautifully. Yes, Kingsmill was right; the world holds many horrors.

We live in a world where people sometimes attack and kill each other for no good reason; and even the most sheltered life carries a lot of pain. That's just the nature of life, and humour and acceptance of life's suffering is a better way of dealing with this reality than miring oneself down in sadness. But innocence and the rawness of first experiences - the themes present in Housman's poem- are also an important part of life, and dwelling on these matters might make you feel a little sad, but it also a beautiful reminder of what it means to live, attentively and honestly.

This isn't to say that Kingsmill's parody isn't also beautiful; there's a jaded beauty present in the act of presenting everyday things like spilled ink and hanging bacon as high art, even if you are only doing so in mockery. But it's a different sort of beauty and doesn't discount the value or beauty of the first poem. And just because surviving terrible things -or even just the everyday tribulations of life- can be both life-affirming and wisdom inducing, it doesn't make innocence is any less beautiful or precious.

We need both, and the tension between the two states of being is important as well, because it forms a question that we all must answer, in order to live happy lives. How much should we - like Kingsmill's narrator- harden ourself to the world's blows and take embrace life's ridiculous -and often darkly funny- limitations; and how much should we - like Housman's narrator- keep ourself open to the raw beauty and romance of new experiences, even if this will also open us up to pain?

Each of us will answer this question differently; the correct answer would be, for example, dramatically different for a holocaust survivor and for a

sheltered nine year old penning his first love letter, but that doesn't mean that either answer is wrong, only different. And the beauty of these two poems is that, despite how different their answers are, both have merit. Only the reader can know which is more right for them.