Love, Murder and Suffering in William Wordsworth's "The Thorn"

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Abstract

The present paper simply explores and goes through some rushing emotional human tendencies which result in conditions extremely harmful and tragic to a young lady who is swindled by a fickle lover. These conditions are adultery, murder and misery which are juxtaposed to each other, so that feelings of frustration, bewilderment and suffering are produced and then focused on.

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As a poet of nature, William Wordsworth in his metaphorical poem The Thorn has successfully managed to convey his beautiful imaginary ideas through a selected natural object, a thorn. However, it would seem clear that the subject of the poem is the thorn that the poet, or more accurately that the narrator has seen: it is an old, grey, wretched forlorn thing that stands erect in nature alone. But the subject is really Martha Ray and her subsequent sufferings. In general, the poem, as a whole, is considered a triumph in its fusion of two elements, the human passion and the natural scene, so that each expresses itself in and through the other. In the poem, however, the thorn, the natural object, has become a kind of metaphor for the woman who has been courted by an
irresponsible and insensitive person, Stephen Hill and then abandoned by him after she has become pregnant with his child.(3) Here, the natural setting in the poem is the thorn, located less than five yards from the mountain's path that goes:

| High on a mountain's highest ridge, |
| Where oft the stormy winter gale, |
| Cuts like a scythe, while through the clouds, |
| It sweeps from vale to vale; |
| Not five yards from the mountain-path, |
| This thorn you on your left espy; |
| And to the left, three yards beyond, |
| You see a little muddy pond, |
| Of water, never dry; |
| I've measured it from side to side; |
| 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide. |

(ILL. 24-34)

Only three yards from the thorn, there is a small pond of a muddy water. Strangely, although it is bare to thirsty suns and parching air, it is never dried.(5) It is said that this muddy water never dries as it is watered by the tears of Martha as well as the bleeding body of her baby.

Martha Ray was deserted by her reckless fiancé some twenty-two years ago. Before that time a lovely young happy lady had fallen in love with Stephen Hill who had promised to marry her. Martha's friends and other kinfolks have looked with approval on her right choice.(6) But unthinkingly, Stephen brings another woman to the altar and leaves his first victim suffering eternally;(7) “And with this other maid to church/ Unthinking Stephen went--”(ll.126-127). In the course of the poem, Ray's intimate, sweet romantic relationship is focused on and is reflected clearly. The following extract reveals this relationship:

'Tis now some two and twenty years,
Since she (her name is Martha Ray),
Gave with a maiden's true good will,
Her company to Stephen Hill,
And she was blithe and gay,
And she was happy, happy still,
Whene'er she thought of Stephen Hill.

(ILL.115-121)

As a happy, joyful lady, Martha has been celebrating and enjoying glorious, lovely fascinating moments with her lover; her life and love are spiritually devoted to a person who proves, later on, to be a man of infidelity and treachery for he has already made promises to another woman: (8)

And they fix'd the wedding day;
The morning that must wed them both,
But Stephen to another maid,
Had sworn another oath.

(ILL. 122-125)
As a result of his disastrous betrayal, the abandoned, frustrated lady is deeply shocked and is certainly the victim of her deceitful Stephen:

A fire was kindled in her breast,
Which might not burn itself to rest,
A cruel, a cruel fire they say,
In her bones was sent.
It dried her body like a cinder,
And almost turn'd her brain to tinder.

(ll. 227-232)

The pathetic woman who has been completely captivated by Stephen before, is now incapable of extinguishing that fire which comes over her body and soul. Her body has become like the ashes under which a very small piece of burnt wood starts blazing wherever and whenever Stephen lurks around or visits her disturbed memory, whereas her brain turns to be a dried piece of material which is burnt easily and only used for kindling a fire. The lines that follow relate that six months after Stephen has left her, Martha was big with a child, a child that is presumed to be buried under a mound of earth over which the thorn grows. (9) This desperate woman has a hut, but she is hardly ever in it. Instead, Ray spends much of her time journeying to and sitting by the thorn at its mountain-top site. Therefore, regular trips are made to the thorn by night and day. Yet, her poor child was never seen since that Martha has been in the habit of climbing the mountain and sitting between the thorn and the mound: (10)

They say full six months after this,
While yet the Summer-Leaves were green,
She to the mountain-top would go;
And there was often seen;
'Tis said, a child was in her womb;
As now to any eye was plain,
She was with child, and she was mad,
Yet often she was sober sad,
From her exceeding pain,
Oh me! ten thousand times I'd rather
That he had died, that cruel father.

(ll.133-143)

The lines above, purely state and reflect the tragic condition of the helpless mother who has given birth to a child. She is so excited and perplexed to the extent that what she carries in her hands is the baby who is dead now. (11) Presumably, Ray unconsciously kills her baby and blames no one, but her lover. She wishes that Stephen should be dead instead; "That he had died, that cruel father."

Martha Ray is now going to pay her regular visit to the child who is buried there. He is on:

This heap of earth o'er grown moss;
Which close beside the thorn you see,
So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,
Is like an infant's grave in size.
As like as like can be:
But never, never any where,
An infant's grave was half so fair.

(ll. 49-55)

People do not know if her child was born dead or alive, or whether miscarriage or abortion occurred nevertheless. In a few lines of the poem, the narrator does dispute the prevailing crime: "But kill a newborn infant thus! / I do not think she could." (ll. 223-4). Despite that the speaker more frequently reaffirms the rest of the village's belief in Martha's crime; people disagree to her method of murder, "but all and each agree / The little babe was buried there." (ll. 218-9). The narrator's own investment in some version of this plot is somehow betrayed by his opening description of the thorn, pool and hill, where the gray thorn is compared to a child and the hill to a grave. Here, the speaker also lays the groundwork for the infanticide charges he will later relate; he describes the thorn almost as if it were being punished by nature for witnessing or participating in some secret wrong. However, no one knows for sure how is the crime achieved, yet the preceding extract illustrates her cruel deed:

I cannot tell, but some will say,
She hanged her baby on the tree,
Some say she drowned it in the pond,
But all and each agree,
The little babe was buried there,
Beneath that hill of moss so fair

(ll. 214-219)

Rumours in the air(gossips) tell that Martha has killed her baby by hanging him on the tree. Some say(Martha's country folks)that the poor child is drowned by Ray in the pond, whereas a few claim that the moss is red because of the colour of the infant's blood. Yet a sense of bewilderment pervades the whole atmosphere as no one surmises what has been schemed against that forlorn, innocent little creature.

Martha, the wretched mother, is dramatically engaged in the murder she has savagely practiced. She goes to the place all the time, both in the day and at night and in all kinds of weather. In this respect, the hysterical woman has a special relationship to the natural forces that surround her; "And she is known to every star/And every wind that blows."(ll.69-70). Martha, as always, recalls her infant with a sense of agony, regret and suffering:

And there she sits until the moon,
Through half the clear sky will go,
And when the little breezes make,
The waters of the pond to shake,
As all the country know,
She shudders and you hear her cry:
'Oh misery! Oh misery!'

(ll. 203-209)
The lines quoted above reflect and show the state of torture the desperate lady has been undergoing. She has nothing to do but to stay for hours beside her baby lamenting her deplorable, harmful condition, a condition that is coloured and fused with grief, sorrow and suffering. The fact that Ray has committed her atrocious crime of killing her child implies one thing; it means that she has murdered her strangled love which was born dead. The last six lines of the poem become a suffocated cry: they reveal the real great attachment of the regretful woman to the spot where her child lies. These lines depict the inner conflict and suffering of Martha:

When she was in the mountain high,
By day and in the silent night,
When all the stars shown and bright,
That I have heard her cry,
'Oh misery! Oh misery!'
'Oh woe is me! Oh misery!'

(ll. 248-253)

She deeply sighs and desperately cries to herself in the words; "Oh misery! Oh misery! Oh woe is me! Oh misery". Now, Martha's plight is always recalled and depicted as a tragic figure who is really attached to the thorn which symbolizes her victimized child. She has been tolerating the scorn of the country town: her heartless lover neglects her. She pines away and finally is expired on the sick bed of poverty, unloved even by her child to whom she has been too weak to express her love. She is the woman who is extremely enslaved by her heavy burdens of grief and anguish.

To sum up, it has become clear that the aim of Wordsworth in "The Thorn" is carried out through three phases. The first one is summarized by the tender, absolute romantic atmosphere that unites the two lovers. This sweet relationship leads, later on, to a catastrophe especially for the swindled lady who has trusted a crooked lover forever. The second phase is illustrated and tackled through the alleged vicious crime exercised by the heartless mother who is pushed to commit it in order that she would satisfy her blind malice against the man who deceives her. The last phase is expressed through the sheer agony, grief, suffering and above all misery Martha Ray is always haunted by. Moreover, this merciless murder will be always remembered as a retaliating action against lust and sin both lovers have shared. What is more important is that the delirious woman is paying a heavy price now: she suffers and will suffer all the way through. And now, it seems that "The Thorn" has been the representation of a crime, a crime that can include child murder. At any rate, nature, the true shelter of Martha hopefully sympathizes passionately and dramatically with her love and suffering. Hence, Martha Ray is now sketched as a timeless sufferer who has become the prey of her predator.
Notes

6. Ibid., p.97.
9. Ibid., p. 98.

Bibliography