

**A Surprising yet Inevitable Conclusion:
Assonance, Metonymy, and Metaphor in “Strange fits of passion have I known”**

Picasso believes poets and painters mirror their use of composition and imagery. He says, “Painting is poetry and is always written in verse with plastic rhymes, never in prose. Plastic rhymes are forms that rhyme with one another or supply assonances either with the forms or with the space that surrounds them.” In a painting, this assonance might mean linking forms by painting them exclusively red, or linking objects in a jumbled still life by a similar shape. One thinks of Brueghel’s painting *The Blind Leading the Blind*, where the descending figures all relate to each other by both color and shape. And in his diary, Van Gogh likens his painted suns to the gold-leaf haloes of earlier art forms. Intuitively, the viewer sees a landscape as an expression of a personal spirituality.

In his poem *Strange fits of passion have I known*, William Wordsworth composes a painting from words; his assonance and relational imagery reflect Picasso’s truism. At first, the poem seems quite simple, even schematic. By framing his story as a memory, Wordsworth estranges the events from an agreed-upon reality:

Strange fits of passion have I known,
And I will dare to tell,
But in the lover’s ear alone,
What once to me befell.

Indeed, the poem’s imagery lends itself to symbolism—one feels the self-conscious hand of the poet crafting it. He brushes away accidental, idiosyncratic details that readers might associate with real experience. Only one simile (When she I lov’d, was strong and gay/And like a rose in June...) disrupts a Byzantine landscape: a man; a horse; a moon; a roof; an orchard. He

notes that even the paths seem well rehearsed to him, and perhaps in this way, schematized. At the same time, nature has become allegorized: King Nature. There is nothing wild and unknowable here, as in the phantasmal forests of German Romantic poetry.

Yet at the same time, by dint of memory, these schematized elements of nature assume an expressive quality. One tends to remember only those moments infused with emotion. Memory even intensifies the emotional or expressive qualities of events. The reader has an expressive anticipation after reading the first line of the poem—even as a first-person narrator describes a tranquil event, traveling to the cottage of his lover beneath the moon. Yet the poem closes with an ashen thought that seems to materialize from the ether:

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
Into a Lover's head—
'O mercy!' to myself I cried
'If Lucy should be dead!'

One thinks of James Joyce's later innovation of the epiphany; here, a character in a story finds a moment of transcendent thought in a seemingly mundane context. This epiphany usually closes the story. Yet Wordsworth's thought does not even have a transparent stimulus, akin to the snowfall against the windowpane, over the mutinous Shannon waves, and upon the barren brambles in Joyce's *The Dead*. Many critics note that Wordsworth's conclusion seems uncannily modern in how it reveals the way our minds work—with random, jarring thoughts often appearing as if by their own will.

However, the concluding thought seems surprising and inevitable if one only listens, imagines the scene, and embodies it with empathy: subtle assonance; metonymy, the relationship of images placed near to each other; and metaphor, where subjects embody each other to highlight perceptual qualities. The intuitive momentum of the poem occurs in its assonance, an ominous beat within a context of a few schematized images that inform and transform each

other. The horse clops up the hill; the moon descends below the cottage roof; the narrator thinks of Lucy, his lover. Poetic assonance occurs through the suggestive linking of spectral figures: the moon and Lucy. They carry mirroring phonetic “tense u’s” within them. Of course, *Lucy* does not rhyme with *moon* as *June* does in the alternating end rhymes of the second stanza. Here, the poetic linking seems much more subtle, almost airy. Such tense vowels form in the back of the mouth, and linguists call them dark vowels. They tend to be more prominent in somber poems, and slow the flow of words down:

My horse mov’d on; hoof after hoof
He rais’d and never stopp’d:
When down behind the cottage roof
At once the planet dropp’d

Contrast the slowness of “tense o’s,” in hoof and roof (also dark vowels) with the bright vowels formed at the front of the mouth, such as the vowels in *elf*, *taffy*, and *laugh*. Such vowels seem to animate one of Wordsworth’s more light-hearted poems: “And then my heart with pleasure fills,/And dances with the Daffodils.” Just as Wordsworth links daffodils with dancing through assonance, Lucy and the moon become deftly tethered to each other. The moon descends over the course of the poem, and subjectively Lucy descends too, even if the sleepy narrator does not comprehend this tethering: “And, all the while, my eyes I kept/ On the descending moon.” Even *descending* has a falling cadence within it; the word is dactylic, with one stressed beat followed by two unstressed beats. Its sound qualities embody the motion it describes.

The falling moon, a stellar body often associated with femininity, serves as a luminous harbinger for the narrator’s unrealized fears. Phonetic symbolism reigns even over poetic linking in the apt sound of *Lucy* and her counterpart, the moon. *Lucy* derives from the same root as *lucid*, or light. At the same time, one associates the motion of falling with descent and death. Here,

Wordsworth masterfully and almost invisibly weaves an unspoken or *topicless* metaphor, which is evoked only through metonymy, its cousin. Psychologists have shown that metaphors are most effective when two unlike objects are related due to a perceptual quality—especially a dynamic, changing quality such as motion. This relation is even more effective when motion exists in symbiosis with a second perceptual link, such as color or light. Most metaphors surprise the reader because at first, the objects thrown into relation seem unlike each other. Think of “a dream deferred” and “a raisin in the sun,” to excerpt Langston Hughes, or in this context, “the moon” and “Lucy.” This revelatory effect, delivered so unusually yet so simply, startles the reader. No wonder the sleepy narrator seems startled by the seemingly unprompted fear that Lucy might be dead.

Here the moon is the vehicle of the topicless metaphor; Lucy remains the unstated topic—the object whose true nature will be revealed by the falling light of the moon. In her book *Invented Worlds*, the psychologist Ellen Winner writes that, “While the topic is the focus of attention, paradoxically the vehicle does the bulk of the work.” Not surprisingly, the moon lowers throughout the poem, but Lucy remains only an inert, anticipatory thought in the narrator’s consciousness. Notably, Wordsworth pairs the first mention of Lucy with her cot.

Even as the moon illumines an otherwise unknown quality in Lucy, the two bodies used in the metaphor retain their true form. In his book *Visual Thinking*, the psychologist Rudolf Arnheim cites an excerpted poem by Denise Levertov to explain this phenomenon:

and as you read
the sea is turning its dark pages,
turning
its dark pages

He writes:

“The motion of the waves and the turning of the pages cannot be fitted in a unitary perceptual situation. Confrontation, however, presses for relation, and under this pressure the common element, the rhythmic turning, comes to the fore in its purity, conveying a sense of elementary nature to the pages of the book and readability to the waves of the ocean.”

In this way, the falling moon and Lucy become twinned images, but they remain natural in their portrayal—so natural that even the narrator does not consciously see how closely he has associated these two heavenly bodies. Here assonance, metonymy, and metaphor work just like the assonance of form and color in a Picasso painting. Poetic perception rises beyond the realm of mere language and conscious thought, startling the narrator and reader alike.