

The Relation of Thought and Emotion in "Surprised by Joy"

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In the sonnet "Surprised by Joy," William Wordsworth relates an episode of his struggle to cope with the death of his young daughter. That this elegiac poem, written to express grief, begins with joy is a testament to its emotional complexity. Although the poem's emotions range between exposing extremes, the thoughts of the narrator remain stable. As he relates his experience, he looks back with an unfaltering conviction that nothing but sorrow must result. Cognitive psychology's concept of dissonance provides a useful insight into the relationship of thought and emotion in the sonnet. According to dissonance theory, when thoughts and emotions seem to contradict each other, a state of anxiety, called cognitive dissonance, will result. This anxiety motivates attempts to achieve stability by restoring the unity of thought and emotion. In accord with the cognitive viewpoint, this sonnet differentiates between two types of emotions: those that are independent of conscious thought and are characterized as transient, instinctive, and arousing, and those that comply to conscious thought and are characterized as permanent, orderly, and tranquil.

"Surprised by Joy" is a Miltonic sonnet with the turn occurring roughly in the middle of the first line of the sestet. Wordsworth uses the sonnet form to create tension in the octave and resolve it in the sestet. The tension in the octave is one between thought and emotion. In the first quatrain, the narrator describes being surprised by a joyous feeling. He is eager to share the "transport" provided by this feeling with someone lost. The second quatrain introduces feelings of love for the deceased, which the narrator gives as the lingering connection that revives his

memory. His positive emotions and automatic connection with the lost loved-one contrast with the narrator's cognitive appraisal of the situation. His thoughts say that the lost loved one is unreachably "buried in the silent tomb" and that he has suffered a "most grievous loss." As the octave concludes, he realizes that he has been overwhelmed with emotion and has momentarily forgotten his bereavement.

In the sestet, emotions turn to overwhelming grief and sorrow as thoughts still speak of irrevocable loss. The narrator describes the returning thought of his loss as "the worst pang that sorrow ever bore." He emotionally relives his loved one's burial, which literally prevents physical contact with the deceased, and symbolically prevents spiritual contact. Although joy and love are the impetus of his thoughts, it is their dreary finality that consummates his reaction. Thus, the sestet resolves the narrator's unexpected joy into the grief dictated by his conviction that the deceased is completely lost to him.

Instinctive and thought-based emotions are differentiated by the opposing ideas of instantaneousness and eternity. Wordsworth uses the octave to convey a momentary air. In the octave, the "surprised" narrator describes his "transport" into a state lasting "for the least division of an hour." Imagery and the use of rhyme also support the idea of an instant. The first line presents the image of the Wind linked with the idea of impatience. This image evokes thoughts of an uncontrollable and unpredictable force of nature. The word "Wind" is later linked by rhyme to the word "mind", which associates the force with the narrator's internal state. This association reveals the recollection to be an instinctive, reflexive reaction to joy. Joy unleashes an internal drive, and love rushes forth of its own accord. Rhyme also links the "power" affecting his positive feelings to an "hour." The reactionary state remits quickly.

In the sestet, the narrator's instinctive emotional state is ended by the returning thought of his loss. The sestet represents an eternity. The narrator laments "That neither present time, nor years unborn" could bring the deceased back to him. Now that his emotion accords with his thoughts, he cannot escape it. It will last indefinitely, or at least until he achieves a less dire outlook.

Wordsworth uses the organization of the octave and the sestet to represent the opposing ideas of chaos and order, which are related to the nature of the emotion in these sections. The lines in the octave do not exhibit symmetry. Caesurae occur in widely varying positions within the line. This, coupled with a great deal of enjambment, creates phrases that do not conform to the frame of the poem. The octave intrudes into the first line of the sestet, after which the use of line becomes dramatically different. This is evident in the five full lines after the turn with one exception; all of the lines are end-stopped. The caesurae here break the lines into symmetrical units. This contrasting chaos of the octave and order of the sestet reflect the contrasting types of emotions they convey. Chaos is appropriate for the octave because its instinctive emotion is inexplicable. The narrator himself is unable to account for any emotion besides grief regarding his state. Order is appropriate for the sestet because its thought-based emotion can be explained rationally. It simply makes sense for thought and emotion to coincide.

In many ways, what reveals the most about the emotions in the poem is its metrical arrangement. The octave's meter contributes to an agitated mood. This agitation is a reflection of the psychic conflict arising from the narrator's inability to accept emotions contradicting his thoughts. This section includes excited statements in which interjections interrupt the train of thought. Wordsworth delivers interjections forcefully by beginning them with a stressed syllable.

For example, in line two the interjection "Oh!" is placed in the regular iambic pattern such that it falls on a stressed syllable:

"I turned to share the transport- Oh! With whom\ But Thee..."

Beginning with a stressed syllable not only gives this interjection a heightened inflection, but also propels the reader into the interjection. Iambic feet move toward stress. In the caesura preceding the interjection, the stressed syllable is anticipated because the pause occurs in the middle of an iamb. Thus, the meter rushes this interjection into the poem much like thoughts rush into the agitated mind. Another metrical technique that drives the octave forward is the replacement of an iamb with a pyrrhic foot. This occurs in the first line: "impatient as the Wind" and in the third: "buried in the silent tomb." This again moves the poem forward by delaying a stress and allowing anticipation to pull the reader forward. The way that the meter drives the reader through passionate effusions conveys the narrator's agitation at being "beguiled" by his unwanted joy.

In the sestet, where the narrator's emotions comply with his conscious awareness, the narration becomes tranquil. Thoughts, for example, are expressed composedly and without interruption. The meter also reflects a more sober mood. Variations from the iambic pattern often put a stress on the first syllable of a foot by replacing an iamb with a trochee or spondee. The first two feet of line ten ("Was the worst pang") exemplify both replacements. Such displacements of stress break the steady iambic beat and thus seem to slow the pace of the poem. This contributes to a feeling of calm acceptance in contrast to the frantic and confused octave. By amending his emotions to match his sorrowful thoughts, the narrator has relieved the cognitive dissonance created by his joy.

The narrator's progression from instinctive to thought-based emotion is the central event in the poem. The psychological struggle that this progression represents concludes in a defeat. The joy and love that initially overtake the narrator can be seen as a sign that he is ready to abjure his grief-ridden thoughts and recognize a lingering spiritual bond with his daughter. He instead rejects these impulses. Thought is the component of our internal environment that we can directly control, and with it we can actualize or suffocate emotions. The narrator uses his thoughts to reject joy and accept sorrow. In this way, he perpetuates his grieving in the face of impending happiness.

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Dr. Hanson's Comments: *This essay was written in response to an explication exercise in a course designed to introduce students to the fundamentals of the English major. The essay was written by a psychology major taking the course as an elective. It demonstrates not only excellence as an explication, but also as an interdisciplinary application of psychological theory to literary analysis.*