

Love as a Social Value in Selected Modern English Poems: A Thematic and Discursive Study

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Abstract

The present paper investigates how literature in general and poetry in particular can reflect the social values of a society during a certain period of time. It aims through literary and linguistic analyses of selected modern English love poems to show how poets use their literary imagination and employ linguistic resources to present love not only as a universalistic human emotion, but also as a social value. Four poems are selected as the data of analysis in the paper. These poems are analyzed for their literary and linguistic aspects starting with the former and using the latter to supplement it. The results of the analysis have revealed that the poets adhere to the spiritual love which is infinite in terms of emotion and time as opposed to physical love. Such adherence can be clearly seen through the use of certain literary devices and linguistic resources.

Keywords

Modern poetry; love poetry; literary analysis; linguistic analysis; social value.

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Introduction

The expression of social values and practices can take different forms ranging from the short exchanges and talks ordinary people are engaged in, through the speeches and interviews some public figures may deliver or participate in, to the most elevated forms represented by the different literary genres. The present paper chooses modern love poems as data to search for the expression of one of the most important human emotions and social values, which is love. The poems chosen for the analysis include Oscar Wilde's *Silentium Amoris* (The Silence of Love), Emily Dickinson's *Wild nights*, E. E. Cummings' *I Carry Your Heart with me*, James Joyce's "My love is in a light attire". The questions the paper is trying to answer are:

1. To what extent can a literary discourse such as poetry reflect a social value associated with such a powerful human emotion like love, which is normally addressed in ordinary discourses?
2. How can an analysis reveal the literary and linguistic resources love poets use to advance a sort of love that represents the tendency of the era they are living?

1. Literature Review

1.1 Love Poetry

Love has always been a common theme in English poetry throughout the ages. Chaucer's poetic work is full of love poems such as *The Court of Love*. His poetry presents a panoramic view of all types of love, divine and profane, physical and spiritual, especially in his *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) in which love is a recurrent theme in all tales (Sharhan 2015:69).

After Chaucer, the poetic treatment of love witnessed a historical development, thanks to the first English sonneteers of the Elizabethan Renaissance of the sixteenth century. The introduction of the concept of *courtly love* into English poetry is attributed to poets and court gentlemen like Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard (1517-1547), who were influenced by the Italian Petrarch (1304-1374). With the approach of seventeenth century, the Courtiers or Royalists of Kings Charles I and Charles II view the loved woman as a mere object, a mistress of flesh and blood whose main function is to satisfy a man's desires (Sharhan 2015:69).

This attitude towards the woman as a beloved underwent a significant change in the nineteenth century by the Romantics and the Victorians after them. The Romantics generally began a tendency to represent women as goddesses, moral guides and ethereal creatures rather than real women. Therefore, in their description of women, physical features and bodily aspects were not of prime concern; instead, women were used as entries to higher and sometimes philosophical spheres. Wordsworth's (1770-1850) *Lucy* can be a typical example of this new tendency, as he describes her as a violet, a lonely star, and a source of guidance and spiritual comfort, without saying anything about her shape, colour of eyes, height, ...etc. This is also true of Keats's (1795-1821) love poems, Byron's (1788-1824) praise of different ladies such as his *She Walks in Beauty* and many other examples (Sharhan 2015:70).

With the Victorians, the figure of woman became more real and realistic in nature and this is due to the nature of the age, being highly industrial, empirical and scientific. Women of the age are described as hard workers in factories, housewives and mothers, but the passionate tendency towards them is less than that of the romantic one (Sharhan 2015:70-71). In the modern ages, English poets adopted various approaches to the loved woman, incorporating a mixture of all: the medieval spiritual tendency, the renaissance courtly treatment, the

metaphysical outlook, the romantic idealism and the Victorian realism in the treatment of women (Sharhan,2015:71).

1.2 Literary Appreciation and Linguistic Analysis

A number of scholars have emphasized the importance of having a linguistic analysis along with the literary one when studying literary works. For instance, Verdonk (2002:55) observes that the concern of literary critics is to highlight the effect of language as an aspect of the whole literary work, with the interplay of character, the relationship between plot and theme, and so on. Linguistic, or what he calls stylistic analysis, can supplement interpretation by indicating how “the macro features that the literary critic is interested in might be displayed in the micro features of linguistic texture” (Verdonk 2002:56). Short (1996: 6) suggests that stylisticians try to discover not just what the text means, but also how it comes to mean what it does. And in taking over this task, they usually start with established, agreed interpretations for a text.

Saporta (1960:83), differentiates between the literary critic and the linguist with regard to terms each uses. He mentions *value, aesthetic purpose ...etc.*, as an essential part of the methods of most literary criticism. On the other hand, linguists’ statements include references to *phonemes, stresses, morphemes, syntactical patterns... etc.*, and their patterned repetition and co-occurrence. Of special interest is the extent to which an analysis of messages based on such linguistic features will correlate with that made in terms of value and purpose (Saporta,1960:83).

The literary critic, Widdowson (1975:4) argues, "is primarily concerned with messages and his interest in codes lies in the meanings they convey in particular instances of use. His aim is interpretation." On the other hand, the linguist’s primary concern is with the codes themselves and the interest in particular messages is for their illustration of how the codes are constructed." His aim is the textual form although he may use interpretation as an end to his analysis. In other words, the linguist treats literature as text while the literary critic treats it as messages (Widdowson 1975:5).

2. Methodology

2.1 Data of the Analysis

Four modern love poems are selected for the analysis in the paper. These are Oscar Wilde's *Silentium Amoris (The Silence of Love)*, Emily Dickinson’s *Wild nights*, E. E. Cummings’ *I Carry Your Heart*, James Joyce's *My love is in a light attire*. Each poem is analyzed for its literary aspects and then is analyzed linguistically to show how language has contributed to its literary effect.

2.2 Framework of Analysis

The analysis of the poem in its both levels, i.e., the literary and the linguistic, draws on methods of analysis offered by scholars in Stylistics such as Leech (1969), Leech and Short (1981), Simpson (2004). These books contain analyses of poems from both the literary and linguistics perspectives with the aim of showing how the literary aspects cannot be separated from the linguistic ones when it comes to the analysis and appreciation of a literary work, especially poetry.

3. The Analysis

3.1 Oscar Wilde's *Silentium Amoris* (The Silence of Love)

As oftentimes the too resplendent sun
Hurries the pallid and reluctant moon
Back to her sombre cave, ere she hath won
A single ballad from the nightingale,
So doth thy Beauty make my lips to fail,
And all my sweetest singing out of tune.

And as at dawn across the level mead
On wings impetuous some wind will come,
And with its too harsh kisses break the reed
Which was its only instrument of song,
So my too stormy passions work me wrong,
And for excess of Love my Love is dumb.

But surely unto Thee mine eyes did show
Why I am silent, and my lute unstrung;
Else it were better we should part, and go,
Thou to some lips of sweeter melody,
And I to nurse the barren memory
Of un-kissed kisses, and songs never sung. (Bogue, 1881, p. 123)

Based on the biography in Macmillan Guided Reader (2013), Oscar Wilde was an Irish dramatist, novelist, poet, and critic born in Dublin on October 16th, 1854. His father was a well-known doctor in Dublin, and his mother was a well-known literary hostess who was also a poet. Wilde moved to London in 1879 after receiving his B.A. from Oxford and published his first book, *Poems*, two years later. The majority of his poetry in this collection had previously appeared in various Irish publications. The poems called *Impressions* are among the greatest in the 1881 collection. Between the release of *Poems* in 1881 and the present day, *The Sphinx* and *Panthea* are two of Wilde's most renowned poems.

3.2.1 Literary Analysis

In this love poem, Oscar Wilde's voice is that of a lover addressing his beloved. He wishes to sing to her, but her beauty renders him speechless, *thy Beauty make my lips to fail*. The romantic features are obvious in the poem like *the sun*, *the moon*, *the nightingale* as they are used to reflect *the beauty* that makes the persona's *lips fail* to speak or sing. As the persona cannot express his feelings to his beloved, he tells her to watch his eyes to know his feelings and why his lute is *unstrung*. If she does not, he will not enjoy singing his song. Wilde metaphorically uses *un-kissed kisses* to refer to the dreams and memory the persona had of his beloved. This metaphor reflects imaginary kisses as the persona lacks the courage to do them physically because of his beloved's spell. In the last stanza of the poem, the persona sends a message to his beloved about love and self-respect *it were better we should part, and go*. Although he loves his lady but he would leave if she does not respond to his feelings. The persona expresses regret and feels sorry for himself.

3.2.2 Linguistic Analysis

Wilde models language in such a way as to create an image of a spiritual love with a helpless man loving a woman deeply but cannot get that feeling out and confess to her. This deep love is indicated by phrases *sweetest singing* and *stormy passions*. What makes the lover unable or hesitant to reveal his love is the beauty of his beloved ...*thy Beauty make my lips to fail*. Even if he decides to confess his love, he cannot do it properly ...*And all my sweetest singing out of tune*. The other reason that prevents the lover from pronouncing his emotion is that his love is too extreme to be expressed ...*my too stormy passions work me wrong*, *And for excess of love my love is dumb*.

Wilde also uses a comparative structure to compare his beloved's beauty to the *resplendent sun* and his inability and helplessness to the *pallid and reluctant moon*. He uses another comparative structure to compare his strong passion to the high wind that damages what at other times is a playing mate ...*with its too harsh kisses break the reed*. The lover invites the woman he loves to look into his eyes to know why he never says anything about his feelings to her *why I am silent and my lute unstrung*. If that does not work, he prefers parting in which she will be happier than he is as she will enjoy *sweeter melody*, and he will live with *barren memory of un-kissed kisses and songs never sung*. So, this poem reflects the inner feelings of a deep silent love, or a secret unrequited love.

4.1 Emily Dickinson's *Wild nights*

Wild Nights! Wild Nights!
Were I with thee,
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!
Futile the winds
To a heart in port,
-- Done with the compass,
Done with the chart!
Rowing in Eden!
Ah! the sea! (James, 1993, p. 56).

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), a single poetic genius without a mate, was taught immorality and worldly concern by her tutors as a result of her exposure to things beyond her private domain. Alternatively, she may have been left with nothing except her emotions as a result of this emotional shambles. ‘This emotional wreck might have left her with nothing but her only soul mate, poetry, her own kind of poetry, enigmatic, bold and innovative’ (Al-Manifi, 2018:1).

She spent the majority of her time at home alone. She gradually developed a propensity of solitude, leading to local rumors about frustrated love and a domineering father, as well as other gossipy guesses. Following her father's death in 1874, she became an invalid. She hid herself in the house and showed an extraordinary lack of respect for her mother's apprehension of being observed by strangers. Emily Dickinson began writing poetry when she was in her teens, but did not give evidence of her serious intentions as a poet until 1862. (Thackrey, 1954: 1).

4.2.1 Literary Analysis

Another important poem of the modern period that reflects the concept of love is Emily Dickinson's *Wild nights*. It is one of the most famous poems which highlights the imagery of the sea used to show passion and desire. The persona depicts the powerful love in the wild nights by the sea and shares these nights with her absent lover. She imagines herself as a sailor on a stormy sea, looking for the harbor of the lover. The lover in the poem might refer to the persona's longing to be closer to God, or merely the desire to be close to another one.

Firstly, the poet uses epizeuxis technique of the quick repetition of *Wild nights - Wild nights!* which gives readers a sense of strength of passion from the beginning of the poem. The persona insists on this phrase to involve readers right in the middle of the storm with her. The word *wild* gives the sense of the conditions and energy of nature. And so the love is wild and hurts and damages the surroundings. The persona depicts her own heart to be as a sailor or a boat in a stormy sea and the beloved is the safe place, the port. These images make the persona a traveler and a seeker and the beloved as a terminal safety place, which is symbolized by *compass* and *chart*.

4.2.2 Linguistic Analysis

Emily Dickinson uses repetition, parallelism and special words to create an image of a lover that finds solace and excitement in her beloved's company amid the hardship and pressure of life. At the beginning, she repeats the noun phrase *Wild Nights* making it an unusual beginning of a love poem, but soon she completes the idea by saying that *wild nights* would be *our luxury* if we were together. She uses words related to weather and sailing comparing herself to a ship and her beloved to a port. When she is with him, she fears no winds or storms as the second stanza implies with the sentence *Futile the winds To a heart in port* that ends with the parallel phrases *Done with compass, Done with the chart* which indicate stability in love. As a sailor, the persona loves the sea as understood in the exclamatory phrase *Ah - the sea* but being in the sea is just temporary and promising of a passionate return to the port *Might I but moor-tonight-in thee* which is the lover's arms.

4.3 E. E. Cummings' *I Carry Your Heart with me*

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
my heart)I am never without it(anywhere
I go you go, my dear; and whatever is done
by only me is your doing, my darling)
I fear
no fate(for you are my fate, my sweet)
i want

no world(for beautiful you are my world, my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you
here is the deepest secret nobody knows

(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grow
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart (Nawaz, 2014: 55-56)

The American poet, painter, essayist, and playwright Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) or as is known E.E. Cummings wrote approximately 2900 poems, novels, plays and other literary works. It is significant to consider Cummings' free-form poetry to follow the twentieth century. Most of his poems were sonnets and they covered the topics of nature, love and the relationships of a person with his society (<https://www.poemhunter.com/>).

4.3.1 Literary Analysis

I Carry Your Heart with me is one of the most well-known love poems Cummings wrote. The title of the poem gives the impression of the deepness of love and closeness of the couple. It expresses an honest and open feeling of true love which makes one's heart, metaphorically, carry the heart of his beloved. Her heart is his biggest value and precious treasure.

The persona seems unconcerned about the future, confident that whatever occurs will be exciting as long he and his beloved are together. Thus, the speaker has no desire for a different kind of life, believing that his partnership with his sweetheart is sufficient. As a result, everything in existence appears to be filled with the lover's existence, allowing the persona to comprehend previously meaningless components such as the moon. Similarly, the delight that the sun gives now appears to be linked to the lover's relationship with the persona.

Anyone else is unaware of the tremendous sensation of connection that comes as a result of the speaker's relationship with the lover. Their love is so basic and pure that it mimics the fundamental truths of existence in the natural world, growing and expanding like a tree, so tall and gorgeous that it defies human comprehension. And the complexity of this love is so deep that it's comparable to the forces of nature that keep the stars from colliding. They are united in one body and this reflects their real love that prevents their separation for any reason or whatever circumstance they may experience.

4.3.2 Linguistic Analysis

Apart from linguistic idiosyncrasies Cummings is famous for, he beautifully manages to present with words and structure an image of what could be described as an obsessed lover addressing his beloved. In the first stanza, the poet tells his beloved that they are so integrated and unified that her heart is inside his *I carry it in my heart* and that they are always spiritually together *I'm never without it*. What's more is that everything he does seems to be inspired by her *whatever is done by only me is your doing*. This sense of inseparability is further maintained by the collocation of first and second person pronouns *I and you my and your* as well as the combinations *my dear* and *my darling*.

In the second stanza, the poet uses adjectives to present the amazing qualities of his beloved by considering her his *sweet fate* and his *beautiful and true world*. For him, she is as bright as *a moon* and she is the joy that *a sun* brings to life. In the third stanza which is based on parallelism mostly of noun phrases, the poet describes his extraordinary love for his beloved as *the deepest secret* which *nobody knows*. It is the essence of life but something that exceeds the limits of the soul's hopes and the mind's capacity. What keeps the two lovers connected is the same force or miracle that prevents the stars from crushing together.

4.4 James Joyce's "My love is in a light attire"

My love is in a light attire
Among the apple-trees,
Where the gay winds do most desire
To run in companies.
There, where the gay winds stay to woo
The young leaves as they pass,
My love goes slowly, bending to
Her shadow on the grass;
And where the sky's a pale blue cup
Over the laughing land,
My love goes lightly, holding up
Her dress with dainty hand.

Joyce was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1882, to a middle-class Irish Catholic family. He used pre-raphaelite-style lyrics in "Chamber Music" (1907) and "Pomes Penyeach" (1927), a second collection of lyrics written in an oddly traditional way. Joyce returned to Zurich after the beginning of World War II in 1939, where he died in 1941 (https://www.tinkenglish.it/file/James_Joyce.pdf).

4.4.1 Literary Analysis

This poem was inspired by Joyce's blossoming love for Nora Barnacle. It was published in the Dana journal in August of 1904 (1957, p. 143). The opening stanza of the poem metaphorically describes the movement and walking of the persona's beloved like a butterfly with her light wings, *light attire* and how she was desired by the young to be accompanied. The *apple-trees* alludes to the biblical *Song of Songs*, which is obviously featured in the poem and suggests natural connection. The poet metaphorically uses natural features and link them to describe the effect of his beloved's presence not with him but in the surroundings.

In the second stanza the description of his beloved's movement continues, but now this butterfly will stand *where the gay winds stay*. She walks as *slowly* as queens in the garden. The persona's stormy love goes gently and follows meandering to hold *her shadow on the grass*, where here the *grass* gives a clear *shadow* of his girl since they are short and small and do not separate her shadow.

In the third stanza, the persona describes his beloved as a queen who goes *over the laughing land* and *lightly, holding up/ her dress* with her pretty hand. Nothing is mentioned about the emotions of the beloved towards the persona as if it is a one-sided love. This gives the impression that there is a gap between them and he is looking at her from a distance, spying on her movements. The poet personifies natural features to create his poetic devices such *the gay winds* go through the *apple-trees* and the metaphorical companion between them.

4.4.2 Linguistic Analysis

Instead of saying *My love is wearing a light attire* the poet says *My love is in a light attire* apparently for metrical reasons, but also for unfamiliarity of expression. The persona's beloved is alone in contrast to *the gay winds which most desire to run in companies*. *The gay winds* seek companion with *the young leaves* but the persona's beloved shows no interest in that and is *bending to her shadow on the grass*. The sky is also in love with the land through

rain *the sky's a pale blue cup* but the persona's love has no company and is *holding up her dress with dainty hand*.

Obviously, the persona is watching the one he loves from a distance. This is indicated by the use of the deictic spatial expression *there* in the second stanza, which implies a one-sided love at least at that moment. Interestingly, the persona gives a very beautiful description of his beloved especially in the last two lines of the second and third stanzas where he uses parallelism: *My love goes slowly, bending to / Her shadow on the grass* and *My love goes lightly, holding up / Her dress with dainty hand*. Within these lines there are words and phrases that express qualities of the beloved such as *goes slowly* and *goes lightly* and *dainty hand*. The repetition of the phrase *my love* is also remarkable.

5. Discussion

The analyses of the four poems at both the literary level and linguistic level have revealed a tendency of the poets to propose and argue, through personas, in favour of love as a social value. The interest of the lover in the relationship with the one they adore is not to satisfy their personal desires which might be momentary; nor is it in something physical that the beloved has, but the interest is creating a social bond with the other which lasts as long as they live on earth. In Wilde's poem *the Silent Love* the emotion of love is so powerful that it makes the lover unable to express what he feels to his beloved. Although the lover praises his beloved's beauty and how that renders him speechless but this would not prevent us from thinking that beauty is a result and not a cause. In other words, since the lover is obsessed with his beloved he sees her as exceptionally beautiful.

As for Emily Dickinson's *Wild nights*, it is clear that love here means safety and relief for the lover as she finds her salvation from life challenges and dangers in being with her beloved. When they are together, even the most difficult situations and times turn into *luxury* and nothing can do her any harm. In Cumming's poem *I Carry your Heart with me* we find the integration of the lovers. Love here unites the hearts or the souls of the lovers and even unites their destiny. It is a strong and permanent bond which can never shake or weaken no matter how hard or challenging the experience the lovers have. As a social value, love must unite and not separate. Finally, James Joyce's poem *My Love is in a Light Attire* presents a lover watching the one he loves from a distance. He wishes to be closer to his beloved and expresses his astonishment at her being alone while the law of nature requires creatures to live together in groups to the extent that even inanimate things have this tendency. To sum up, love is a social bond that attracts people to each other and lays the basis for establishing social groups that start with couples and then become larger. The study has used a number of modern love poems to investigate how poetry as a genre of literary discourse can employ the theme of love in the sense of a social value that brings people together not for their own personal and momentary desires but for the need to live in groups and share life luxury and hardship with others.

Conclusion

Social values can be reflected in different forms of behaviour and language in either its spoken or written form is the most important of these. The present paper has investigated how writers, namely poets, take their responsibility to express and advocate a very fundamental and significant value which is love.

In the poems analyzed in this paper love can be so powerful that one cannot express, as illustrated by Wilde's poem; or a unifying force as indicated in Cummings' poem.

Alternatively, love may mean safety as shown in Dickinson's poem. Finally, love is just watching as represented in Joyce's poem. In each of the above poems the poet uses words and structures in various ways to express their view concerning love and the relation between the lovers.

The paper has analyzed a number of English modern love poems in terms of literary creativity and linguistic expression which are directed at presenting the social value of love in the best way it should be. All the selected poems have something in common which is the theme of spiritual love being expressed in language so pure and elegant in terms of words and structures. The analysis has made salient two theoretical implications. First, poetic themes and style can materialize abstract emotions, such as love, in ways that are characteristically representative of a culture or an epoch. Second, poetry can serve as a powerful means of expressing and sustaining social values by combining literary imagination and linguistic aptitude to produce the desired effect on the receiver.

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