

Animating Absence: Exploring Ekphrasis and Prosopopoeia in Thomas Hardy's "The Voice"

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Abstract— Thomas Hardy's "The Voice" (1914) is written in quatrains and employs a monologue structure. Conventionally, it is interpreted as a reflection of the poet's personal experiences, notably his sense of an absent voice and the apparition of his wife, Emma. This study deviates from biographical interpretations, instead, it sheds light on a detailed analysis of the verse's rhetorical elements. Through semiotic reading, I will investigate the process of animating the image of the absent female figure in the work by exploring ekphrasis and prosopopoeia. Therefore, the primary goal of this paper is to examine the poem's inherent aesthetic qualities by decoding the signs and symbols within expressions in the language. This essay shows the essence of the literary devices as the speaker depicts the face of the missing woman, and also, it reveals the paradox related to the timespan which operates dynamically, shifting back and forth between the characters.

Index Terms— ekphrasis, prosopopoeia, semiotics, Thomas Hardy, voice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy's "The Voice" was composed for his collection *Satires of Circumstance*, written between 1912 and 1913, and later published in 1914. The verse was written after the death of his wife, Emma, therefore, most readers of the poem relate this text to the melancholy of her departure. That is to say, critics visualize her death as mourned in this work — Hardy appears to express deep regret as their relationship deteriorates over time. Moreover, scholars think that the poet is consumed by guilt for his mistreatment of his wife and he envisions her calling out to him repeatedly. The images in verse are interpreted as metaphors for Emma's appearance, for instance, one vivid memory is of a dress she used to wear, described as "air blue," he realizes that it might just be the wind whispering through the thorns. As the year approaches its end, he observes falling leaves all around, symbolizing the end of growth. Once again, he hears the voice. Eventually, he longs to see his partner as she appeared in their early days when they eagerly awaited each other. Draper (1992) thinks that most of the voices in Hardy's poems possess a "feminine" quality, which can be attributed to his wife Emma; her passing deeply affected the poet, evoking sadness within him and serving as inspiration for his poetic compositions (p. 80). Lock (2009)

claims that Hardy employs the concept of the voice and it's a challenge which encounters to create a disconnect between language and its expression, between various voices, rhythms, and physical forms. His fascination with ghosts is not a morbid fixation, but rather a method to represent a poetic approach that could endure through time (p. 463). Different from these interpretations of the verse, the aim of this study is to read the poem closely through semiotic lenses — following the thread of the analysis, I will explore the literary devices — prosopopoeia and ekphrasis — which are obscured in the language.

The former, prosopopoeia, is a literary device wherein an individual's non-existent or imaginary is depicted as speaking. In the realm of classical rhetoric, it serves as a form of personification or impersonation (Nordquist, 2020). The French author, Pierre Fontanier, defines prosopopoeia as distinct from personification, apostrophe, or dialogism—although often found in conjunction with them — and encompasses the portrayal of entities that are absent, deceased, supernatural, or even inanimate. Through this literary device, such entities are imbued with agency, enabling them to engage in actions, speech, and responses akin to human tendencies. At the minimum, these entities can assume roles as confidants, witnesses, accusers, avengers, and judges (Riffaterre, 1985, p. 107).

Besides Fontanier, the modern literary critic and theorist, Paul de Man, asserts that metaphor is not merely an aspect of poetry, but a fundamental component. Prosopopoeia, though considered fictitious and lacking ontological foundation by de Man, is indispensable for the creation of poetry. While a mountain, in reality, lacks a visage, the poet, even when eliminating metaphorical expressions from their language and perceiving things with intense clarity, cannot evade the presence of personifications deeply embedded in the intrinsic structure of our language, such as phrases like "face of a mountain", "headland", and "eye of a storm" (Miller, 1991, p.110). The latter— ekphrasis — from Greek, signifies the meaning 'description'. In poetry, an ekphrastic poem entails a vibrant portrayal of a setting or, more frequently, an artwork. By employing their imagination to narrate and contemplate the 'action' within a painting or sculpture, the poet can enhance and broaden its significance. Laskaya (2017) states that in the realm

of English literature, the interpretations of ekphrasis exhibit variation across different essays. The definitions employed range from encompassing classical and medieval notions, which encompass vivid and emotionally resonant depictions of objects or individuals, to more restrictively aligning with contemporary perspectives. Others view ekphrasis as a verbal representation that adheres to the aesthetic principles and conventions of a particular historical era (p. 82).

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This research employs a qualitative method and semiotic reading. To begin with the etymological meaning of the term semiotics, the term was used during the 1620s referring to matters concerning disease symptoms. It comes from the Latinized version of the Greek word "semeiotikos," which means "significant," suggesting something worth noticing or marking. It also denotes an observance of signs. The word is derived from "semeiosis," which means "indication," originating from the Greek verb "semeioun," signifying the act of signaling or interpreting a sign. "Sema" in Greek refers to a sign, mark, or token. Its application in the fields of linguistics and psychology, pertaining to the use of signs, became prevalent by 1923. As a concept, semiotics is a field pioneered by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who examines the role of "signs" in language and explores the connection between words and their meanings – signifier/signified (Saussure, 2011, p.67). This approach investigates the relationship between the signifier (the physical form of a sign) and the signified (the concept or meaning connected with the sign). As Roland Barthes states:

In his Course in General Linguistics, first published in 1916, Saussure postulated the existence of a general science of signs, or Semiology, of which linguistics would form only one part. Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (Barthes, 1967, p. 9)

In other words, this system looks into how signals work in a given context and how they contribute to the overall meaning of a text or cultural phenomenon. In other words, semiotic analysis seeks to reveal underlying messages, ideologies, and cultural codes hidden in a given text or cultural artifact by analyzing the signs presented in it (Fatah, 2021, p. 98). It also contributes to the understanding of the complicated ways in which meaning is formed, shared, and understood within a certain culture or civilization. By conducting in-depth examinations of the language and phrases within the poem, my study would be directed toward the text itself, rather than delving into the author's life circumstances. This analytical approach draws from the principles of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, prioritizing the text's inherent qualities over its production context. Eventually, the reading will be focused on exploring the meanings behind the terms in the lyrics, and also,

presenting the technical aspect of the verse through the literary devices: prosopopoeia and ekphrasis.

III. READING THE TEXT

Hardy's "The Voice" consists of sixteen lines that employ a monologue format, wherein an unidentified narrative voice, presumably a male character, engages in a reflective discourse, expressing a sense of detachment from a female character, possibly a partner. The speaker begins by conveying general emotional states and subsequently delves into recollections of past experiences. Throughout the poem, the female character is depicted through the use of diverse metaphors, contributing to her multifaceted portrayal.

The initial indication of the title, "The Voice," appears to convey the notion of sound produced through speaking or singing, as well as the articulation of one's viewpoint. However, it signifies the broader concept of communication, speech, or expression. The use of the definite article "the" implies a familiarity with the sound to the speaker. At this level, the precise connotation of the title remains ambiguous; whether it pertains to the voice of the female character or it simply represents an echo. The initiated statements in the verse are expressed by a speaker who seems to ask for the woman's passion:

*Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.*

The opening line introduces the readers to a female persona: "[a] woman" who is being "much missed," by the speaker. The signification of these terms implies a male figure who seems to be deeply yearning for the female character. At this point, I highlight the term "missed" which suggests the idea that the woman is absent, either through death, physical separation, or being distant in some way. Furthermore, the phrase "call to [the speaker]" suggests the act of vocalizing or uttering something loudly in order to capture the speaker's attention. Additionally, it conveys the meaning of requesting or beckoning someone to approach and come to the speaker's presence. From this perspective, it seems to show a wish to hear her voice once again. Strikingly, the present tense of the sentence shows that the female character calls him to say that "now [she is] not as [she was]". The linguistic expression employed in the poetic verses proposes the underlying proposition that the female persona has undergone a transformation. In other words, this indicates that she is not deceased or absent, yet she no longer embodies the identical qualities and attributes as those previously associated with her.

However, the specific aspect in which this lack of clarity exists is not evident. It remains uncertain whether the ambiguity pertains to the woman's attitude, thoughts, appearance, or sentiments. The subsequent expression, "when you had changed from the one who was all to me," appears to serve as an illustration of the preceding statement, evoking a transformation in the woman's emotions and attitudes towards the speaker. The narrative voice reminisces about a time when

“[their] day was fair,” which could allude to their wedding day or perhaps the initial encounter. The term “fair” here conveys notions of beauty, honesty, or delight. Consequently, the speaker seems to perceive a reverberation of a sound from the past. It is essential to highlight the function of the prosopopoeia in the expressions; the speaker seems to give a face to the absent female character – as one reads the verse it becomes plain that she is in the present. Besides prosopopoeia, the ekphrasis also appears as the narrative voice describes the female character – this implicitly is presented for the readers as a visual work.

*Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!*

In response to the voice reaching the male character, he expresses a desire to see the woman; the phrase “let me view you” conveys the meaning of requesting to visually perceive her. This statement presents multiple interpretations: on the one hand, it suggests that the speaker is physically distant from the female character. On the other hand, it implies that she may be in close proximity but not looking at him or showing attention. However, the language introduces an ambivalence, leaving it unclear whether the “woman” is actually present or if the “voice” is merely an echo or a reverberation in the audience’s perception. This is another evocation of the appearance of the woman through the indicative use of prosopopoeia; the narrative voice constantly attempts to depict the appearance of the woman within the vision of readers. At this point, the language of the text explores the concepts of both auditory and visual perceptions. The male figure continues to interweave the present moment with glimpses from the past, as he metaphorically “draws near to the town,” signifying an approach or proximity to a particular place or moment. From a broader explanation, it appears to show that the speaker used to be in the “town” which suggests the possibility that the male character may have originated from a rural area. The comparison of the timeframes – the moment of the monologue and back then in the “town,” the essence of the poetic language reveals itself through the hidden premises; the timespan shifts, nevertheless, her image is still in the current moment through depicting her persona.

The woman, who was in an “air-blue gown” used to “wait for [him],” this seems to propose the idea that the characters were far away from each other and they would meet each time in town. Technically, the ekphrasis appears once again as the male persona describes and visualizes the female image in her garment. The presence of the woman is not solely perceived by the narrative voice, but also by readers actively constructing a cognitive representation of her. Thus, the literary device of prosopopoeia continues to manifest within the text. It is also essential to state that the description of the female character’s dress with the color “original air-blue” may suggest the meaning of melancholy, as the color (blue) symbolizes a gloomy mood. Another possibility – ‘blue’ seems to be the color of the sea and sky. In other words, it could be a mere imagination of the narrative voice. The other suggestion is the term “original” might be a qualifier for the dress, to put it

another way, it describes the woman in a metaphorical way to be from the upper class. On the whole, there is a sense of uncertainty in the verse from the previous evokes, in which the ‘voice’ and the ‘color’ might be echoing the past, and the latter could be a show. This would provide the image of a spirit or an abstract concept.

*Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?*

The speaker appears to be disoriented and caught up in the deceptive movement, giving the impression that they are uncertain. Hence, the term “breeze” connotes the meaning of gentle wind or brisk walking. Within this context, there is a sense of obscurity regarding the woman’s actual existence or whether she is merely a figment of imagination. The word “breeze” is associated with a state of “listlessness,” indicating passivity, ennui, or a lack of engagement. This might be related to the sentiments of the “woman”. The terms “traveling across the wet mead to me here,” appear to depict a landscape with wildflowers and grass. The word “mead” is derived from (meadow). Technically, the language of the verse might provide a plain picture of the country in which the speaker has been waiting for the woman to be blown by the “breeze”. The speaker’s description of the landscape seems like a portrait in the eye of the readers which clearly depicts the details through ekphrastic images. The terms also signify the concept of (harvest), metaphorically, the female character might be compared to autumn leaves, in which they are carried by the wind “listlessly”.

Eventually, the narrative voice questions whether the woman is “being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,” which proposes the meaning of being disappeared and turned to a pale melancholy. To put it another way, she has left him behind for misery which it’s “wan” that seems to denote the meaning of pale or colorless. Figuratively, it seems to connote a sense of monotony or boredom. The speaker contemplates once more if they can perceive any trace of her presence, whether distant or close. In essence, the envisioned image of her is a collection of signals that symbolize sorrow. The narrative voice compares the woman to nature through multiple metaphors:

*Thus I; faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.*

The verse culminates with the phrase “thus I; faltering forward,” indicating that the narrator ceases to advance either nearer or farther. Metaphorically, this suggests a connotation of death. The line “leaves around [him] falling” appears to establish a connection with the “wet mead,” which is being juxtaposed with the woman. Consequently, he finds himself encompassed by her image and voice. Additionally, the “wind” is depicted as “oozing thin through the thorn from norward,” connoting a sensation of trickling and pricking. In other words, it is a painful gust blowing from the north, symbolizing a cold wind. In these terms, the verse conjures an ekphrastic portrayal of a somber and frosty setting. Furthermore, the key point of

interest lies in the paradox; whether the wind carries the woman's voice or if the sound of the wind is likened to her voice. Moreover, the cold wind appears to be connected to the breeze, which no longer retains its previous pleasantness. The verse presents an indication of the potential erosion of the emotional essence shared between two individuals in a relationship, wherein the male protagonist exhibits a longing for the voice and physical presence of the cherished "woman" in his life. The voice is related to the female character – which has been transformed. For this reason, prosopopoeia plays the key role as the female figure's voice is compared to a sharp and cold wind that hurts the speaker, the change in her voice is also related to the image of the woman, who seems to be there but she doesn't look at him.

From a broader explanation, they fall apart after all the voices, images, and visions have been changed. Similarly, the "leaves" change after they fall from the trees, and in the same way, the "breeze" turns to cold wind. The linguistic portrayal implies the notion of impermanence, where all entities undergo metamorphosis from their original states which are all presented through literary devices. Hence, the title "The Voice" refers to someone's sound that is known or similar. However, it is not the same, this paradox seems to provide the previous idea of the female character's passion, and the last phrase of the verse "and the woman calling" seems to suggest the meaning the speaker is calling for a woman's voice. Apparently, the calling of the female persona is emotionless and cold as the "wind".

CONCLUSION

Thomas Hardy's "The Voice" was composed during the second decade of the twentieth century, following the passing of his wife Emma. Consequently, scholars have been captivated by the notion that this poem reflects a melancholic sentiment surrounding her departure. In this study, my endeavor was to confine its analysis to the literary devices employed within the poem. The attempt was to add an extraordinary approach to reading Hardy's verse. Through a close reading of the poem by means of semiotic analysis, I unraveled the signs and symbols of the words to explore invisible meanings and to highlight the aesthetics of the language, eventually, both literary devices: ekphrasis and prosopopoeia were explored and investigated. This objective was pursued through meticulous examination, wherein the speaker recurrently invokes the voice and the elusive presence of the female character. Both the narrative voice and readers were able to envisage her countenance through the application of ekphrasis and prosopopoeia. These literary devices are rooted in the language of the text and function which lead readers to look at this poem from a broader perception – ekphrasis and prosopopoeia have introduced technical challenges within the texts, presenting riddles – this seems to call for a deeper investigation of the layers of meanings of the expressions. Therefore, the analytical focus rested upon elucidating the rhetorical aspects embedded within the verse, rather than exploring external influences.

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