

*Tragic Vision in Wordsworth's  
"The Ruined Cottage"*

My gentle reader, I perceive  
How patiently You've waited  
And I'm afraid that you expect  
Some tale will be related...

Wordsworth's "Simon Lee"

*Suleiman Yousif Abid*<sup>(\*)</sup>

Tragic vision is not a new subject to William Wordsworth particularly when we know that he has an experience in composing a tragedy called The Borderers. This tells us that his experience in presenting some tragic poem called "The Ruined Cottage" is not a surprise. Thus, of all the themes expressed by Wordsworth in this poem, the tragic vision perhaps remains the most dominant. It appears throughout the story of the poem. Its subject, though has been bewildering to the readers of Wordsworth, provokes an interesting flavour to their taste. Therefore, we notice the tragic vision is clear in

---

<sup>(\*)</sup> Dept. of English – College of Arts/ University of Mosul.

this particular poem although he passed a long life in a quiet place among the mountains of the Lake District.

Wordsworth's great narrative poems, like "Michael", "The Idiot Boy", and "The Ruined Cottage", are about people whose love for each other threatens to make them not see anything else. They are all ambivalent towards the value of living. Although there are differences in the structure, tone and plot, still they debate the paradox in the human being.<sup>(1)</sup>

In "The Ruined Cottage", which is centered on a broken home, Margaret, the heroine of the poem, is confined to a place which seems to exclude the possibilities of values which still survive. Yet she shows the sense of loss to which her vision of the world is reduced and makes her vision tragic in the sense that it is gloomy, sad and finally ends in the death of some of the characters especially the heroine. It is by no means the action of the story of Margaret that relates the tragic vision, but the atmosphere of the poem confirms the sad and gloomy attitude of Margaret as well. So "the desire for death in the relatively free form of blank verse appears through the poet's control of feeling and atmosphere"<sup>(2)</sup> Generally this is an indication that feeling generates form when referring to the poem. K.R. Johnston also approves the tragic vision and suffering idea of the poem when he says that the story

of Margaret, the purest of Wordsworth's art, uses inferences to the suffering stories successfully.<sup>(3)</sup>

Thus it tells the story of a woman who lives only for the man she loves and adores. Her husband abandoned her. She gradually loses the will to care for the happier times they had already lived together. To her distracted imagination, the landscape becomes a sterile vacuum. Yet the poor Margaret clings to the place in the hope of his return, as she tells:

This tale did Margaret tell with many tears  
And when she ended I had little power  
To give her comfort, and was glad to take  
Such words of hope from her own mouth as served.<sup>(4)</sup>

(529 - 32), p.394

She stays sacrificing literally everything to her love. Her distance of reality has given the story pathos which fight against hopeless odds.<sup>(5)</sup> Actually little has been said about men and women in such stories but they exhibit what

Wordsworth calls in the Preface of 1802 "a power of real substantial action and suffering."<sup>(6)</sup>

Literary men might think that a tragedy is applied to drama only, however to find the same thing applied to poetry might seem strange.

As we know all that the protagonist in a tragedy meets usually unhappy or disastrous end. The central character is focused on and finally the hero or heroine is brought to a downfall whose causes vary. To deal with such an idea in "The Ruined Cottage" means that there are some similar positions in it. Throughout the analysis and study of different examples presented, the tragic vision is clearly expressed. This approach, however, makes the story of the poem tragic. It enquires the value of interpreting human life in tragic terms. In order to understand fully the poem as a tragedy, we must reassess some of the common assumptions. Margaret's story, first of all, like most tragedies, embodies exaggeration of humanity. The poem forces us to approach the uncommon intensity of Margaret's sorrow through a dramatic framework. But we have to bear in mind that neither the Pedlar, who tells the story, nor the Poet<sup>(\*)</sup> who listens to it, is a tragic figure.

The Pedlar begins the story of Margaret's life with a repeated emphasis on her death:

---

(\*) The poet in the story of the poem is a character who listens to the Pedlar stating the story of Margaret.

She is dead

The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,  
Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers  
Of rose and sweet- briar, offers to the wind  
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is trickled.  
With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead.

(353-58), p.390

As many tragedies that start with death or sorrow and sadness, the Pedlar gives a clear picture of death in the beginning of the poem. His description of the woman as "She is dead" and the "worm on her cheek" and her poor condition tells us that the tragic beginning and such sense of poverty which provokes pity are but to demonstrate the idea of tragedy. The arousal of pity as well is a clear reference to verify the idea of a tragedy because it accomplishes part of catharsis since it brings about pity in the readers or spectators.

Robert, Margaret's husband, is an important character in the story. People usually know that tragedies concentrate on important people. Robert is also an important person in "The Ruined Cottage", because his wife, at least, is so proud of him. She thinks that he can make or produce "things" and bring happiness from simple things with which he works like the wool of sheep and the production of the garden because

the Pedlar remembers Margaret say:

I have heard say  
That he was up and busy at his loom  
In summer ere the mower's scythe had swept  
The dewy grass and in the early spring  
Ere the last star had vanished. They who pass  
At evening from behind the garden fence  
After his daily work till the day-light.

(369-76), pp. 390-391

The importance of the character does not come only from the position he occupies i.e. to be a king or a prince. His importance springs from the society outlook to the thing achieved by the character. In the poem, she takes pride in seeing that her husband able to do things others cannot.

Robert's madness is revealed in the poem by his behaviour that challenges the natural world and by his rough treatment of the people he loves:

And he would leave his home, and to the town  
Without an errand would he turn his steps  
Or wonder her or there among the fields,  
.....  
And with a cruel tongue, at other times  
He played with them wild freaks of merriment  
... "Every smile,"  
Said Margaret to me here beneath these trees  
"Made my heart bleed."

(430-40), p. 392

His madness reminds us of Hamlet when he knows that his uncle has killed his father and married his mother. The tragic sense is increased when one notices a person who is completely sane pretending madness simple to assure to himself the horrible reality of what he hears. The madness of protagonists shows and explains different ideas but all reflect the tragic sense that would emphasize human attitude towards life which is full of controversies.

The dramatic framework calls us to approach Margaret's story from a tragic point of view. When the poet listens to the story of Margaret, he thinks that the passion and the resurrection of suffering are clear in it. This means that passion is derived and taken from the

suffering of human being. <sup>7</sup>Tragic action reveals strong passion and attracts our admiration. The strong passion is clearly clarified when one discovers the permanent suffering of Margaret as Robert leaves his home to a distant land and her suffering lasts her life-long period.

Margaret's love is tragic since she keeps on suffering behind a "hope" of the coming of her husband. Her love also is tragic for she is deeply passionate creature who is badly in need of a fellow whose life is essentially infinite. The pain felt by Margaret in her unlimited love for Robert cannot be shared. Yet her ruined cottage is already a crumbling image of a specific love which will eventually end from the earth as it is stated:

We die my friend  
Nor we done, but that which each man loved  
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth  
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon  
Even of the good is no memorial left.

(326-30), p. 389

Pity is a normal tragic sense evoked in the reader or listener. However, the words in the above lines express inevitably "death" following everyone and even sometimes nothing is left behind the death of some people. They will be forgotten and neglected since "no



memorial left" after them. Although the lines reflect a permanent fact of death yet one finds within the lines a flavour of the arousal of passions which convey a profound tragic vision in life. To confirm the idea of strong passions reflecting tragic vision in life is embodied in the Pedlar remembrance visiting the cottage to find Margaret's love has turned to grief which makes it difficult to answer her needs:

With fervent love and a face of grief  
Unutterably helpless, and a look  
That seemed to cling upon me, she enquired  
If I had seen her husband

(509-12), p. 394

Her grief is due to the loss of her husband, which in a way means "death".

Robert has joined a troop of soldiers going to a distant land leaving the sum of money he has been able to earn, where his wife will find after he has gone. In fact, this is a terrible miscalculation because he is not able to understand fully what his wife really wants. In addition, her love does not diminish towards him, but throughout her words we notice she expresses more pity for him than for herself when she says:

... Poor Man! He had not heart  
To take a farewell of me, and he feared

That I should follow with my babes and sink  
Beneath the misery of a soldier's life.

(525-28), p. 394

He does not realize that he is the victim of forces in the world. Though she starts ignoring the reality round her about Robert yet she keeps always looking for any sign that he may be coming back.

The sadness and grief reach to an extent that Margaret later on begins to feel that what she is doing is wrong to herself and to her "infant" and it is she who speaks of waste and abandoning each new day to tears as says:

... For I am changed

'And to myself said she 'have done much wrong,

And to this helpless infant. I have slept

Weeping, and weeping have I waked; my tears

(602-05), p. 396

This is a sheer admittance that she has narrowed her mind until it becomes only an endless frustration. Even her infant also gets the same feeling according to what the Pedlar notices:

... Her infant bebe

Had from its mother caught the trick of grief

And sighed among its playthings; once again

(659-61), p. 397

Finally, all the members of Margaret's family died. Her husband did not come back, her two "babes" died, "and the two pretty babes." (379), p. 391. At last she also died as it is verified:

... and here my friend  
In sickness she remained, and here she died  
Last human tenant of these ruined walls

(740-42), p. 399

To sum up, what is crucial to the work of "The Ruined Cottage" is not the internal working of the memorable episodes in which criticism sometimes dissolves the poem, but the efforts of arranging and interpreting them as the experience of one character whose life has but one story. Although we are in the shadow of the mystery and uncertain why the poet is moved to state a "tale" in the form of an action, yet "the true subject of the poem is a reflection of the mind of man forcing a still imperfect world."<sup>(8)</sup> The subject is thus a tragic one since it shows us a similar view of a tragedy in which it mirrors the story of Margaret. At least, some similarities, drawn at some places of Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage," are but a clear proof to convince somehow the discussion raised. Thus, the pitiful story of Margaret, the importance of the subject and the disastrous end show a similar subject to some of the great tragedies such as those of Shakespeare's.

### *Notes*

1. G.H. Hartman Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967) , p. 140.
2. D.H Bialostosky Making Teles: The Poetics of Wordsworth" s Narrative Experiments. (Chicago : The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984 ), p . 51 .
3. K.R.Johnson Wordsworth and "The Recluse" (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), p. 265.
4. W. Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage". Quoted from The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth Vol : 5 ed. E. De Selincourt (Oxford:At the Clarendon, 1940 rpt.1967), p. 390.  
All subsequent lines and page references to this edition of the complete manuscript of "The Ruined Cottage" will appear in the text parenthetically.
5. G. Hartman, p. 139.
- 6 T.Hutchinson The Poetical Works of Wordsworth (London : O.U.P, 9),p. 739.
7. E. De Selincourt, The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth. Vol: 2, p. 427.
8. G. Hartman, p. 140.

## ملخص

## رؤية مأساوية في قصيدة "الكوخ الخرب" للشاعر وردزورث

سليمان يوسف عبد(\*)

يتناول البحث الرؤية المأساوية في قصيدة الشاعر الرومانسي وردزورث، ومعالجة مثل هذا الموضوع لا تُعدُّ غريبة على الشاعر، كما انها تعطي نكهة خاصة، وخصوصاً لمن عاش مدة طويلة في منطقة هادئة في الجبال، وفي منطقة البحيرات. وجوهر موضوع الكوخ الخرب "يصف كوخاً مهدماً لامرأة تعيش فقدان القيم التي قديم الحياة؛ لهذا بات العالمُ سوداوياً وحزيناً لينتهي اخيراً بالموت، فالرؤية المأساوية موجودة في الجو العام للقصيدة.

وتدور القصيدة حول قصة امرأة هجرها زوجها، فبقيت تعيش على ذكرى حبها له، وبعد ذلك تفقد الرغبة تدريجياً للعيش بسعادة، فالطبيعة والمروج الخضراء والمناظر الطبيعية لم تعد سوى فراغ مأساوي، فاصبح الكوخ الخرب رمزاً للحب الجميل السعيد، ودموعها لا تفارقها كلما تتذكر ذلك الحب؛ لهذا اصبحت رؤيتها لما

(\*) استاذ مساعد - قسم اللغة الانكليزية - كلية الاداب / جامعة الموصل

حولها مأساوية وهذا هو ما جعل جو القصيدة مأساوياً نابغاً من الذكرى التي تعيشها المرأة، ولما كانت التراجيديا من اختصاص المسرح؛ لذا كان ظهورها في القصيدة يعد شيئاً جديداً، غير أنّ نهاية البطل المأساوي المتجسدة في المسرح نراها واضحة في قصيدة "الكوخ الخرب"؛ لأنّ البطلة ماركريت تنتهي بالموت، كما ان حياتها حزن ومأساة لما عانت منه؛ لهذا فإنّ الطلل الذي تقف عنده إنما هو استعادة للحظات جميلة بقيت في مخيلتها.