

Poetry Analysis

A comparison between R.S Thomas' "*Welsh Hill Country*", Philip Larkin's poem "*Here*"

The *Welsh Hill Country* and *Here* are both examples of lyric poems. This means they both focus on the personal feelings of the narrator. Lyric poems are also renowned for having a wider message and discourse. The purpose of most lyric poetry, therefore, is to make audiences ponder wider philosophical ideas. The *Welsh Hill Country*'s contemplative element is diminishing Welsh culture, more specifically Welsh folk culture and the oral tradition. In terms of *Here* the wider discourse stems from Larkin's disgust towards commercialisation, and the loss of individualism particularly within the working classes. Linked to this is the idea of searching for freedom through geographical mobility. This mobility is achieved by separate train journeys throughout the whole *Whitsun Weddings* Anthology. These train journeys are connoted in the narrative structure and graphology of the poems. Historically, although in different forms, both poems were written during periods of cultural transition. Larkin's poem was written in the sixties during the growing emergence of popular culture, or to use Larkin's marxist terminology mass produced culture. The *Welsh Hill Country* was written in the forties a time when traditional Welsh story telling, singing, and the norm of spoken poetry was disappearing. Larkin and R.S Thomas are using poetry as a way of communicating these ideas and values to audiences. To get his point across R.S Thomas begins his poem by creating a juxtaposition of ideas through his bleak description of the sheep in the field. This image would usually be idilic however Thomas's use of sibilance, and the semantic field of decay, creates a sense of loss and abandonment. Philip Larkin's sparse use of punctuation in his poem *Here* connotes that the poem is a journey. This discourse is created in the readers mind due to the fact that there are no full stops until the end of the poem so they are reading constantly.

The first line of R.S Thomas' poem *The Welsh Hill Country*, 'Too far for you to see', uses the personal pronoun you to achieve a direct mode of address in order to immerse readers in the poem, and allow them to empathise with the feelings of worry, regret and sadness expressed later on. It also gives the poem a narrative structure based on the idea that the narrator is showing readers around the Welsh countryside. This line is repeated at the beginning of the second stanza, the use of repetition emphasises Thomas's feeling of loss. I feel it also connotes that the Welsh people are helpless to save their culture, because the Welsh hill country has been left to a state of disrepair. James F. Knapp of *Twentieth Century Literature* backs up this point by saying

'the poetic world which emerges from the verse of R.S Thomas is a world of lonely Welsh farms and of farmers who endure the harshness of their hill country. The vision is realistic and merciless.'

Knapp's idea of Thomas' poems being merciless is evidenced in the very next line of this poem, 'The fluke and foot-rot and the fat maggot'. Here the poet's use of syndetic listing makes readers feel that the images of decay are continuous and on going. Similarly the use of the judgmental adjective fat to describe the maggot indicates to readers that the state of the sheep's fur is so bad that these pests are able to gorge themselves. This line also uses alliteration, therefore making the line fit together easily. This provides the audience with an understanding of narrative viewpoint. For R.S Thomas these visions are now common place so don't have the shocking effect on him that they would have on others.

The turning point of this poem comes in the final stanza, when the poet focuses on a man rather than the landscape. In this stanza the semantic field of loss and decay is still used. This theme of the loss

of the Welsh culture is captured in the anthesis of the last line 'The embryo music dead in his throat'. This line indicates that the Welsh farmers have these folk songs on the tip of their tongues but there is no audience for them in modern times so they die before a sound is uttered.

The graphology of this poem adds to the narrative structure, there are only end stops at the end of each verse. This mimics the idea of going on a journey or a guided tour of the Welsh Hill country and stopping occasionally to take in what you are seeing.

Similarly to R.S Thomas' *Welsh Hill Country*, Philip Larkin's poem *Here* is also depicting a journey. In this case the journey is taken by train from Hull's city centre to the coast. Much like Thomas, Larkin connotes this idea of a journey through his use of enjambment and lack of full stops. They only begin to appear in the final stanza. Unlike Thomas' poem Larkin uses the formulaic rhyming scheme of A,B,A,B, which mirrors the nature of a train journey. This use of phonology also helps Larkin convey one of the main tensions of the poem, his concern regarding the loss of individualism and the effect that rising consumerism has on the lower middle classes. *The Poetry Foundation* supports this observation by saying 'Larkin employed the traditional tools of poetry...to explore the often uncomfortable or terrifying thrust upon common people in the modern age'.

This poem is also about the emergence of an industrial landscape, which contrasts with the traditional pastoral elements of Hull. Evidence of this theme can be found in the first stanza '...traffic all night north; swerving through fields too thin and thistled to be called meadows,' a lexical field of decay is evident in her through the adjectives thin and thistled. Therefore, the motif of a decaying countryside is another parallel between this poem and R.S Thomas' *Welsh Hill Country*. Larkin's use of alliteration here connotes the speed of the train journey. It also symbolises the blending together of new and old suggesting that these tensions have become normal, formulaic and everyday. The use of the dynamic verb swerving connotes that the city is frantic or out of control. This is emphasised by the fact the word is repeated in the next line. It also gives readers the sense that the Narrator's, that is to say Larkin's mind, is wondering freely and without restraint as he looks out at the landscape.

In the second stanza of this poem, there is evidence of Larkin's distaste for commercial culture, 'their desires - cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes iced lollies, electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers-' the poet's decision to use asyndetic rather than syndetic listing in this segment means that the line length is shorter due to the lack of connectives. This shows that he is attempting to convey that it is too easy to follow the crowd and purchase mass produced products.

The turning point of the poem comes towards the end of the third stanza and continues until the end. Larkin stops focusing on the emerging threat of industrialisation and begins to focus on the loneliness of the coast. 'Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands like heat.' The sudden use of full stops here has two implications on readers. Firstly, it indicates that the journey has come to an end by the coast, and, secondly, this graphology is symbolic of the idea of loneliness because the use of full stops means that these two sentences are separated from the rest of the poem. Larkin's use of the simile 'silence stands like heat' likens the feeling of loneliness to a weather condition therefore conveying its relentless presence.

The line 'luminously-peopled air ascends' is used to tie this stanza in with the rest of poem, the way I interpret it. It refers to the light pollution caused by the inner cities and the 'traffic all night north'. The final lines of the poem refer to the unattainability of happiness. 'Beyond a beach of shapes and shingle.

Here is unfenced existence: Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.' Here readers are given a sense that the narrator is searching for a world without boundaries, this notion comes from Larkin's use of the compound adjective unfenced. The fact he is facing the sun, however, means he cannot go any further so this desire is out of reach. The final full stop connotes the end of the journey as well as the end of the poem.

In conclusion, the themes of both poems are similar. For example, the central concerns of both poets are the loss of tradition and individualism. Both Thomas and Larkin express these feelings through a similar use of language, both poems use the lexical field of decay. There is one main difference between the two poems phonologically, Philip Larkin's *Here* follows the rhyming scheme A,B,A,B although it is not followed with total consistency. R.S Thomas' *Welsh Hill Country* on the other hand does not include any full rhymes until the final stanza. This difference in rhyming pattern can be explained by the fact that Larkin's poem is depicting a train journey, which is strict and linear in itself, whereas the journey depicted in the *Welsh Hill Country* is far less restrained.

