She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways

POEM TEXT

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
—Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

SUMMARY

She lived in a remote place where few people ever ventured, near the source of the Dove River in central England. She was a young, unmarried woman who didn't get the appreciation she deserved in life, and whom very few people loved.

She was like a violet next to a big mossy stone, the result of which was that her delicate beauty was often obscured by bigger, more obvious things—it was hard to fully see and understand her. She was as beautiful as a star when it is the only one to appear in the evening sky.

This young woman was unknown by people when she lived, and therefore few people noticed when this woman, whose name was Lucy, died. Nevertheless, she is dead and buried in the earth—and, I must admit, it has had a serious emotional impact on me.

THEMES

VIRTUE AND APPRECIATION

In "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways," an unidentified speaker mourns Lucy, a beautiful woman who died young and underappreciated in the English countryside. For the speaker, Lucy's beauty was an aspect of her overall virtue, a quiet, mysterious quality she had in spite of the fact that, as the speaker says, "She lived unknown." In a world that for the most part couldn't have cared less about Lucy, the speaker loved her; the speaker insists that she mattered in life, and still matters in death. The poem, then, suggests that virtue like Lucy's can have a lasting emotional impact even if its audience is thin, and that appreciating it is therefore worthwhile.

The first stanza establishes that Lucy was worthy of love and praise despite her anonymity. The poem's title and opening line—"She dwelt among the untrodden ways"—set up a context of anonymity and remoteness. Lucy's "ways," or the place she lived, were "untrodden," meaning very few people walked over them. And she "dwelt" there, implying she rarely left her base. As a result, her chances of encountering other people were slim. This is why "there were none to praise" and "very few to love" her.

By noting that no one praised Lucy, the speaker implies she was *worthy* of praise, and therefore that it's a shame she didn't get the recognition she deserved. The question of love is only slightly different: Lucy didn't go totally unloved, but only "very few" loved her. The speaker, who laments how seriously under-appreciated Lucy was in life, implies that the speaker was one of the few to take due notice of Lucy. In the rest of the poem, the speaker will argue that even though it affected few people, Lucy's virtue had serious value.

The speaker goes on to show how her virtue persisted despite having no audience. Lucy was like "A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!" Because of Lucy's isolation, her beauty and virtue would only reveal themselves under close attention; she was like a subtle flower in the shadow of an obvious rock. Here again, the speaker implies his or her love for Lucy. There was pleasure in attempting to grasp Lucy's virtue, perhaps because it was essentially ungraspable, or "Half hidden." Finding it—or nearly finding it—required serious work. Lucy was also as "Fair" as the first star in the evening sky. Like the star (probably an allusion to the goddess Venus, who represents beauty, love, and sex), Lucy is fair, or beautiful, because she is isolated, and therefore unique. She shines when no one else is able to, suggesting a special power. And even as she went unnoticed, she kept "shining." The speaker, by drawing attention to these aspects of Lucy's virtue—her modest beauty, her mysteriousness, her consistent shining despite having no audience—claims that her virtue was powerful and good, and ultimately unforgettable.

In stanza 3 the speaker says again how seriously under-appreciated Lucy was in life. Though part lament, the observation serves more to emphasize the speaker's final affirmation of Lucy's lasting impact. Lucy "lived unknown." Here, the speaker deepens the claim from stanza 1. Not only did Lucy

go through life unpraised and pretty much unloved—she "lived unknown," the result of which was that few people noticed her death. By emphasizing this point, the speaker seems to consider a counterargument: maybe, if Lucy was so unknown, her virtue didn't matter after all.

Quickly, however, the speaker refutes this idea. Lucy made a "difference." The poem's final line is an exclamatory, and therefore confident, affirmation of Lucy's value. And this is at the moment when she's most isolated: she's not just "Half hidden," but "in her grave," sealed up in the earth. Lucy's virtue is not ultimately worthless, says the speaker. It was enough to make a difference for him or her, and because of that Lucy's memory—and perhaps, in a way, her virtue itself—survives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-11
- Line 6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12

LOVE AND MYSTERY

The poem provides few details about the living situation of its subject, a beautiful woman named Lucy who died young in the English countryside, but it makes clear that she lived in isolation. For that reason, not many people knew her, and far fewer loved her. As one of the "few" who did, however, the speaker reflects upon his or her love for Lucy, lingering over her remote, mysterious qualities; for him or her, this mystery was, and still is, the source of Lucy's loveliness. Love, the poem suggests, is enhanced by this sort of incomplete knowledge of its subject.

In stanza 1, the speaker presents Lucy as a somewhat mysterious figure. Lucy "dwelt among untrodden ways." Dwell, which basically means to stay in one place, is a vague word. It doesn't describe how Lucy actually spent her time, but simply proves that she existed and didn't venture far from home. "[U]ntrodden," which means unexplored, enhances the vagueness of Lucy's situation. These words dress Lucy in an aura of mystery. The speaker is obviously captivated by Lucy (otherwise the poem wouldn't be about her), but doesn't explain why, at least not in detail.

In stanza 2, the speaker points to Lucy's mystery as the *reason* for her loveliness and beauty. She was like "A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!" By comparing Lucy to a flower, the speaker implies she was beautiful. So, one reason for his or her love was Lucy's beauty. But the image gets more detailed: Lucy was like a flower that was "Half hidden." The exclamation mark that ends the line ("from the eye!") conveys the speaker's wonder and excitement. There was something hidden about Lucy, a quality that never waned and always deepened the speaker's infatuation.

Though dead, Lucy's inherent mystery—something about her the speaker just couldn't pin down—survives and continues to inspire love. In the poem's final line, the speaker reiterates through implication the difficulty of expressing this quality. Exactly how she made her impact, the speaker can't say. All the speaker knows is that Lucy made a "difference," a word as open to interpretation as Lucy was.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 3-4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Lines 9-10
- Line 12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,

The poem's first line signals to the reader that this "She," whoever she is, is central to the poem. The speaker doesn't, however, name the main character in these first lines, and in fact won't do so till line 10. The speaker could be withholding this information for a few reasons. For now, though, it's enough to note that the incomplete information infuses the scene with mystery. (For clarity, the rest of this entry will use the name Lucy.)

The language that follows enhances that mystery: Lucy "dwelt," and her "ways" were "untrodden." Each of these words is open to interpretation. "Dwelt" indicates physical activity, and its hard /d/ and /t/ sounds give it a rock-like finality that emphasizes what the reader will soon learn—that is, that Lucy hunkered down and hardly left this place. But the word is also pretty vague, and could refer to any activity, really. How Lucy actually spent her time is still a mystery (and will remain so for the entire poem).

Then comes "untrodden," one of the poem's most important words. Literally, it means "not walked on," trodden being the participle of tread, which means to walk. So this would mean that Lucy's "ways," which refer generally to the place where she lived, were undiscovered territory. This physical definition, however, leads to the more abstract one. If Lucy's *home* received few visitors, then *Lucy* received few visitors. And that would mean few people got the chance to know her (sure enough, the speaker will soon confirm this). As such, Lucy

herself is "untrodden." Sealed up behind her fair, modest virtue is a character that even the speaker, who loved her and knew her, must still describe as "Half hidden."

As if to reflect that its own character isn't entirely knowable, the first line follows a meter that doesn't exactly fit within the standard form. The line is supposed to follow iambic tetrameter, which would give it eight syllables in total, but it has one extra:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways

This small quirk signals that even though this ballad, with its steady meter and near-perfect rhymes, will sound at many points like a nursery rhyme, it will also have moments of transcending its form. In line 1, that rule-breaking draws attention to "untrodden," which is, again, a keyword in the poem. To fit the meter, its last two syllables, "trodden," would need to be compressed into one, and they nearly are, imitating a fast version of the stepping they describe.

The reader may also, however, choose to emphasize the word differently: untrodden. In this case, the action, "trod," is emphasized, signaling the speaker's intention to cover some territory in remembering Lucy and make up for the fact that, in life, she went unappreciated.

And in line 2, the speaker proves that there is in fact territory to cover. Lucy lived "Beside the springs of Dove," or near the place in the English countryside (specifically, the Midlands, a rural area south of Manchester) where the Dove River rises from the earth and begins its southward flow. Lucy, in other words, is not a figment of the speaker's imagination; she was a real person who lived in a real place that the speaker can actually point to. This physical position suggests a few things about Lucy's character. First, the word "springs" reminds the reader that even though Lucy is dead (the speaker hasn't stated this yet, but it can be inferred from the use of the past tense), there is an eternal quality to the place she lived; the river keeps flowing.

Her position "Beside" the river is notable as well. Later, Lucy will be described as occupying marginal space (see line 5). In the same way that, in line 1, she is "among" the "ways" of the countryside, she is "Beside" the river, almost a natural part of the landscape who never loudly announced her presence or demanded more space than she needed.

LINES 3-4

A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

Lines 3 and 4 develop Lucy's character and express what the speaker feels is worth lamenting: that Lucy, though beautiful and virtuous, didn't receive the attention she deserved in life. Also in these lines, the speaker indirectly expresses his or her love for Lucy. (It should first be noted that the speaker still hasn't by this point given Lucy's name, but for the sake of clarity this entry, like the previous one, will refer to the poem's so-far-unnamed female protagonist as Lucy.)

In line 3, the first thing the reader learns about Lucy is that she was a "Maid," which provides information about her character. A maid is an unmarried young woman. In its archaic sense, which wouldn't have been anachronistic in a poem published in 1800, it also means that woman is a virgin. The word, therefore, lends Lucy's character youth and innocence. The word is even capitalized, as if it were a title, but this may be the speaker's playfulness showing. Later the speaker will admit that Lucy remains for him or her, someone who loved her, "Half hidden"; it's unlikely that such a person could perfectly fit the mold of maidenhood, or any mold.

In any case, says the speaker, people didn't dedicate much thought to Lucy: "there were none to praise" her. This is the first piece of the speaker's lament, who thinks it's a real shame that Lucy, this mysterious, virtuous young woman, lived practically ignored by others. But the speaker doesn't blame others for this. The way the speaker says it—"there were none to praise"—seems more like a general statement than an exasperated challenge. The speaker doesn't confront the public and say, "What is wrong with you? This woman was worthy of your attention!" Instead, the speaker admits that because Lucy lived so far off in the countryside, there was really no chance for others to get to know her. In a way, her anonymity was fated.

As a sort of silver lining, however, Lucy was loved. Yes, this piece of information comes couched in the language of lament; it deepens the sorry situation of Lucy's anonymity, as in, "no one praised her *and* hardly anyone loved her." But the "very few" contains the material for the rest of the poem. The poem implies that the speaker was one of those few. If the reader accepts the speaker's word, that literally *no one* praised Lucy while she lived, then the speaker is no less to blame. On the question of love, however, the speaker has a chance to redeem him- or herself. As one of the "few" who loved Lucy, the speaker can praise Lucy through elegy.

Of course, the speaker doesn't explicitly profess his or her love, but the implication is pretty strong. The colon that end-stops line 4 strengthens that implication. What follows, the poem seems to be saying, is an account of Lucy from one of the few who loved her. The line's unflagging iambic trimeter, brief compared to the tetrameter with which it alternates, enhances the colon's propulsive effect.

And ve- | ry few | to love:

The syllables are short, ordered, and clear, a straight arrow pointing toward stanza 2.

LINES 5-6

A violet by a mossy stone

Half hidden from the eye!

Lines 5 and 6 move the poem into territory that is metaphorical but nevertheless representative of Lucy's physical home "Beside the springs of Dove." The lines describe and celebrate Lucy's mysterious nature.

The reader can think of all of stanza 2 as representing Lucy (who, by the way, still hasn't been named; for clarity, however, this entry will once again use her name). It follows the colon that ends stanza 1, and therefore serves to enhance and complicate the portrait of the "Maid" presented in that stanza. The first image in this description is of a flower—a "violet"—something the reader might imagine stumbling across during a jaunt by Lucy's humble little farmhouse, or wherever it is the reader imagines she lived. The "mossy stone" is also a natural feature of this landscape, an image the reader doesn't have to strain to accept; both the flower and the stone simply *fit*.

However, even though this imagery is rooted in a real place, it is metaphorical. Lucy wasn't *literally* a flower; the speaker is simply comparing her to one. Thus, the poem encourages the reader to consider this image. What does it mean that Lucy reminded the speaker of a pretty purple flower next to a big mossy rock?

Here, it's helpful to consider the lines that directly precede the metaphor. According to the speaker, "there were none to praise" Lucy. And it's not that people *chose* not to praise her. They simply didn't know she existed; that's how far away she lived from all the action. And yet, some people loved her. The metaphor in line 5 tells the reader something about those who loved Lucy (of which group the speaker is the most prominent member): they are people who pay attention. They are the type who, when passing by something beautiful though obscured—like a violet next to, and possible in the shadow of, an obvious, attention-hogging rock—would stop and appreciate that beautiful thing. In highlighting Lucy's virtue, which persisted despite being marginalized, the speaker also implies his or her own virtue. Unlike the majority, the speaker paid enough attention to notice Lucy.

Lucy's virtue goes deeper than this, however. The speaker doesn't criticize the mossy stone for obscuring Lucy; it's simply there. Rather, the speaker appreciates Lucy's ability to shine a light on something as drab and quotidian as a moss-covered rock. There was, the speaker suggests, a selflessness to Lucy's virtue and beauty. Rather than hog the spotlight, she enhanced the beauty of everything around her.

Unintentionally, however, Lucy's selflessness also enhances *her own* beauty, at least in the eyes of the speaker. Like the violet by the stone, she was "Half hidden from the eye!" "Half" indicates Lucy's general incompleteness: without anyone to praise her, there exists no definitive record of how Lucy actually lived. And "hidden," of course, enhances Lucy's incompleteness. But the exclamation mark that ends the line conveys the speaker's wonder and excitement—the speaker marvels over Lucy's "Half hidden" quality, and it seems as though the speaker appreciates Lucy even more because of it. To love Lucy, the speaker implies, was to constantly search for the ultimately unfindable key to her mystery. In expressing Lucy's mystery, the speaker further justifies the use of metaphor, the only thing that could approximate Lucy's essence.

The word "eye" also comments on Lucy's inexpressible legacy. Wordsworth often talked about the "inward eye" (see "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), the imaginative space in which the poet represents reality. Lucy, the speaker suggests, resists even the imagination, which is used to filling in empty spaces. She is as distant from the metaphorical eye of the imagination as she was physically distant from the eye of the public.

LINES 7-8

—Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

Lines 7 and 8 heighten Lucy's beauty and complicate her character with a leap from earthly to heavenly description. An obvious starting point for analyzing line 7 is the em-dash. It's not typical to see an em-dash *start* a line. Why, the reader might ask, did Wordsworth choose to place it there and not at the end of line 6? Well, it could very well have been to avoid the clutter that would have resulted from combining it with the exclamation mark; "Half hidden from the eye!—" might have appeared to some as a typo. Another reason might have been to emphasize the major change that line 7 represents. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker describes Lucy in earthly terms. Lines 7 and 8, on the other hand, are totally cosmic. With that in mind, the em-dash represents a flight to the heavens, or the thin, imperceptible line between heaven and earth.

Having crossed into that other zone, the reader can consider the relationship between Lucy and the speaker with the insight granted by a new perspective. Lucy is "Fair as a star." This simile prompts the reader to ask in what ways Lucy's fairness, or beauty, resembles a star in the young night sky. The following clause, "when only one," helps with this comparison. In this case, the star is fair because it is alone in the vastness of night. Despite its isolation, it shines on. The speaker appreciates—indeed, the speaker loves—its persistence. In another sense, however, the star will not persist. It will soon be joined by millions more. Lucy shares this central form of beauty with the star: she is beautiful for her fleetingness. Like the star, there is "only one" of her.

Lucy's uniqueness is also reflected in line 7's meter, which breaks the poem's metrical conventions:

—Fair as a star, when only one

The first foot is not an iamb (da DUM), but a trochee (DUM da).

Another unstressed syllable follows "as," which restores the line's iambic tetrameter, but the line is short enough that the one change makes a rather big difference, emphasizing the words that say the most about Lucy: she was as *fair* as the *only star* in the sky.

Of course, it's not till line 8 that the reader understands what the phrase "only one" refers to. This star is the one star "shining in the sky." This information tells the reader that the star in question is the first to appear in the night sky. Depending on the time of year, it could be any number of stars, but the most well-known candidate for appearing first in the night sky is Venus (which is, obviously, not a star but a planet). The indirect allusion to Venus, the Roman goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and sex, emphasizes Lucy's beauty and the speaker's love for her, but it also hints at another layer to their relationship. It reveals that the speaker's feelings about Lucy may not have been entirely platonic. In line 3, Lucy is a "Maid," which in its archaic sense would have meant she was a virgin. The speaker, in reflecting on his or her relationship with Lucy, may not simply regret that Lucy didn't receive due praise in life, but also that the speaker wasn't able to add a physical dimension to their intimacy.

LINES 9-10

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;

Lines 9 and 10 resemble lines 3 and 4, but don't simply repeat their message. Rather, they deepen the speaker's portrait of Lucy as a young woman who lived alone and unappreciated.

Line 9 begins with the phrase, "She lived unknown." The speaker features the fact that Lucy *lived*, reminding the reader, and those that didn't know Lucy, that despite her anonymity she lived a life just as rich as anyone else's. The phrase is an affirmative reminder. "It doesn't matter that you didn't know her," the speaker seems to be saying. "Lucy lived, and it's my job today to prove it."

This line resembles lines 3 and 4 in that it refers to the public's ignorance of Lucy, but its tone is somewhat different. In lines 3 and 4, the tone is almost hopeless. It is the beginning of the speaker's lament. But the delicate, luminous language of stanza 2 improves the situation a bit. It may be that hardly anyone appreciated Lucy in life, but in stanza 2 the speaker gives her the praise she deserved. Lines 9 and 10, therefore, are infused with slightly more optimism. If it wasn't for the limits of meter, the speaker may just as well start line 9 by saying, "She *may* have lived unknown," and then go on to explain that Lucy's virtue made a lasting impact (and this is exactly what the speaker will do at the end of the poem).

In any case, as in line 3, the speaker doesn't blame the public for not noticing Lucy. It was simply the way things were. The line features a case of polyptoton that emphasizes this attitude of the speaker. The repetition of "know" almost justifies the public's orientation toward Lucy. Lucy "lived unknown," and the reason, the speaker says, is that few had the capacity to know her. Yes, the second "know" actually belongs to a separate clause, which continues in line 10. But the comma caesura's division and the line's graphical length (physically, it's the longest line in the poem) briefly isolate the phrase "and few could know."

Given the content of line 10, which reveals for the first time Lucy's name, and the fact that she died ("ceased to be"), line 9's elongation reflects the speaker's hesitation to admit what happened. As if intoxicated by his or her beautiful memory of Lucy, which reaches its aesthetic peak in stanza 2, the speaker cannot bear returning to earth and admitting that Lucy no longer dwells among the living. The expression "ceased to be" may also be a sort of evasion. Yes, it helps the line fit the poem's alternating iambic tetrameter/trimeter (line 10 is in trimeter), but it also avoids mention of "death," a more painful word. The semicolon that end-stops line 10 supports this reading. The speaker, it seems, must take an extended pause to center him- or herself before continuing.

LINES 11-12

But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

In the poem's final lines, the speaker casts aside all prior hesitation and firmly acknowledges Lucy's death. In his or her final exclamation, the speaker pays tribute to Lucy by recognizing both her impact and mystery.

Whereas line 10 evades the fact of Lucy's death—the rather formal "ceased to be" avoids death's painful language—line 11 acknowledges it firmly. Lucy "is in her grave." It doesn't get more permanent than that. Having started "Beside the springs of Dove," risen from the earth in the form of a "violet," and sprung all the way to the stars, Lucy has returned to her earthly origin. The speaker admits to him- or herself that while it may be possible to preserve Lucy's memory, her real being, for which there is no match, is gone for good. "But she is in her grave," the speaker says. The sharp monosyllables are delivered in unflagging iambic tetrameter, as if the speaker, in order to tell this final truth in the least painful way possible, submits to an automatic instinct.

And yet, before the line ends, caesura intervenes and restores the speaker's imperfect grief. Here, it is a quiet grief. The apostrophe, "oh," is muted, no capital letters or exclamation marks to be seen. The speaker doesn't shout, but hesitates. The speaker senses that the poem's end is nearing, and wants to make absolutely sure that it gets expressed properly, in a way that honors Lucy. The commas slow the line. The "oh," though quiet and lowercase, is extremely heavy. With the word "grave" in mind, the reader might interpret the "oh" as loaded with gravity, or emotional weight. Its slow, heavy silence also enhances, through contrast, the fast, charged shout of the final

line: "The difference to me!"

Though it's fairly obvious throughout the poem, here the speaker finally identifies him- or herself as more than just an abstracted voice: the speaker uses the pronoun "me." If beforehand the speaker withheld explicit emotion, the speaker uses the final line to express all of it—though through a form of withholding. That is, the word "difference" contains pretty much all of the line's emotion, but it withholds information. The speaker doesn't explain what the difference actually is, but rather leaves it open to interpretation.

Paradoxically, by withholding specifics, a restrictive action, the speaker opens the line's interpretive possibilities. Here, the difference is everything: without Lucy, the speaker's world is entirely different. Nothing between the earth and the stars fails to remind him or her of the beautiful young woman who "dwelt among the untrodden ways." The abstract, formless difference also recalls Lucy's mysterious "Half hidden" quality, the impossibility of ever fully understanding her. And the fact that no one else can really relate? That may be the only thing that doesn't make a difference.

SYMBOLS

THE STAR

In "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways," the star from stanza 2 does a lot of symbolic work, representing basically all the personality traits the speaker uses to describe Lucy. In this sense, overall, the star stands in for obvious but inexpressible beauty.

First, it symbolizes Lucy's beauty. The speaker describes the star as "Fair," which in its archaic sense means beautiful. At least in part, the star's fairness derives from its isolation; it is beautiful because it is the "only one" in the sky. So, the star also points to *Lucy's* isolation, reminding the reader of much of stanza 1, in which Lucy is described as living "among untrodden ways"—basically, in an isolated rural location—and having few to praise or love her.

There is also a delicacy in the solely shining star. If it is beautiful for its isolation, then its beauty is fleeting: soon the sky will be crowded with stars. This delicacy, or fragility, recalls the directly previous description of Lucy as a violet next to a mossy stone—a slight, pretty flower thriving in the margin of a big, hairy rock.

Finally, the star points to one of Lucy's contradictions. In stanza 1 the speaker calls her a "Maid," which in addition to implying youth and beauty, suggests, in its archaic meaning, that Lucy is a virgin. And later, Lucy is described as "unknown," which also, archaically, meant virginal.

In one sense, the lone star supports this sense of purity, since it is clear, bright, and uncrowded. It is unobscured by other stars or, for example, factory smoke, which was common in English cities at the time the poem was written. As the first star in the sky, however, this one is probably not a star at all, but the planet Venus, named after the Roman goddess for love and beauty—and sex. In this case, the star stands for Lucy's sex appeal as well. The indirect allusion to Venus, therefore, adds another layer to the speaker's feelings for Lucy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "—Fair as a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem contains two allusions. The first explicitly alludes to a place, the Dove River in England. The second implicitly refers to Venus, the Roman goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and sex.

The Dove River is a waterway in the English Midlands that rises on Axe Edge Moor and flows 45 miles south before joining the Trent River. It's about 30 miles south of Manchester. Line 2's allusion to Dove grounds the speaker's memory of Lucy in reality.

Grief is a hard thing to express. As such, anything that tries to do so could easily depend on totally abstract language, pure products of the imagination. The poem certainly becomes more metaphorical in the second stanza, but this reference to the Dove River tells the speaker that this imagery comes from a specific location: Lucy's "untrodden ways," or the isolated place where she lived. Ultimately this rooting makes the mournful tone more powerful. The "ways" still exist as a reminder of Lucy.

Also, the Dove's proximity to Manchester, a city that was booming at the turn of 19th century as a result of the Industrial Revolution, subtly contrasts Lucy's isolated haunts from the bustling industry to the north.

The second allusion, to Venus, appears in lines 7 and 8, when the speaker mentions the first star in the sky. It should first be noted that this star isn't necessarily Venus. Venus would only have been the first "star" in the sky if its orbit had been such that it appeared above the horizon from the speaker's point of view at evening. However, Venus is probably the most famous of celestial objects that *sometimes* appear first in the sky, so it's reasonable to assume that Wordsworth had it in mind. If the star is in fact a reference to Venus, it emphasizes Lucy's beauty and the speaker's love for her, and hints at a subtler dynamic in their relationship.

Venus is the goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and sex (the Roman version of the Greek Aphrodite). Recognizing Venus in the evening sky, the speaker must be overwhelmingly reminded

of Lucy, whom the speaker believed was beautiful (she was "Fair" and like a "violet") and whom the speaker loved (the speaker was one of the "few" who did). If the speaker compares Lucy to Venus, the speaker may also have in mind her sexuality. This note connects to a few other moments in the poem. In line 3, the speaker calls Lucy a "Maid," which in one of its archaic senses means virgin. And in line 9, the speaker says Lucy was "unknown." Again, one archaic definition of "to know" is "to have sex with." By comparing Lucy to Venus, the speaker may imply sexual attraction to her. Considering the other moments that hint at Lucy's sexuality, the reader might consider the speaker as not only grief-stricken, but sexually frustrated.

This is, however, just one interpretation. The speaker may just as well mention Lucy's virginity in order to emphasize her isolation.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Beside the springs of Dove,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "—Fair as a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky."

METAPHOR

In stanza 2, the speaker describes Lucy with the metaphor of "A violet by a mossy stone." This image of something pretty in the shadow of something rough and overcrowding comments on Lucy's relationship with the majority of people, who did not love her or notice her.

To begin with, a violet is a symbol of delicate beauty. Violets appear in a number of colors, but purple is probably its most well known (the color violet is, after all, a tint of purple). Purple represents a lot of things, including the imagination; things that are "purple" are fanciful and dreamlike. This squares with the description of Lucy. Though the violet and the mossy stone are solid, physical objects that could very well exist by the head of the Dove River, they also occupy imaginative space. Line 6 proves it: Lucy was "Half hidden from the eye," meaning that the speaker didn't fully grasp her in life and must therefore mix his or her memory of Lucy with imagination in order to represent her in the poem.

The metaphor doesn't just consist in the violet, however. It includes the "mossy stone" too. Here, it's helpful to spend some time with the image. What does "A violet by a mossy stone" actually look like? For one, the stone is probably bigger than the violet (it's certainly heavier), and in its hairy mossiness it's probably a bit easier to notice. It may, in fact, be so much bigger than the violet, a rather small type of flower, that it casts a shadow over it. This image fits with Lucy's portrait in stanza 1, which describes her as unappreciated and unloved, and that in stanza 3, which describes her as "unknown."

But the image can also be considered otherwise. Maybe the stone doesn't cast a shadow. Maybe the violet is unique while the stone is one of many. In that case, the violet would stand out bright and obvious, like the first star in the evening sky. This may not fit with the general public's image of Lucy (for the most part, that image doesn't exist), but it certainly does with the speaker's.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!"

SIMILE

In stanza 2, describes Lucy's beauty with the simile "Fair as a star," prompting the reader to reflect on what makes Lucy fair and star-like.

It depends on location and time of year, but the first star in the evening sky *could have been* Venus. Certainly, Venus is the most well known of "stars" (obviously, Venus is actually a planet) that have a chance of appearing first in the evening sky, so it's fair to assume that the speaker has it in mind in lines 7 and 8. Venus is the Roman goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and sex, all of which connect to Lucy's character in some way. In terms of love and beauty, well, the speaker found Lucy beautiful, and loved her. In terms of sex, the speaker notes elsewhere Lucy's virginity—she was a "Maid" and "unknown," both of which, in their archaic definitions, imply virginity. And in terms of fertility, the reader can think of Lucy's memory as being very fertile, producing this emotional response from the speaker.

The simile's biggest question, however, is what about isolation makes something fair. Yes, line 7's syntax implies that any star is fair, no matter how crowded the sky. "Fair as a star" occupies its own clause; "when only one" doesn't qualify stars' fairness, or beauty, in general, but rather adds to the beauty of Lucy's star. The reader can come up with many reasons for why isolation is beautiful. One possibility is that a lone star is fleeting. At least in the country, where there's little light pollution, it will soon be joined by many more stars, a reminder of constant change.

It should also be noted that the name Lucy is derived from the Latin verb *lucere*, which means "to shine." From the speaker's perspective, Lucy's shining was destined, built into her identity. And despite the fact that a sky that holds a single star is fleeting, the image persists in the speaker's memory (and the poem), suggesting there is a way to, kind of, preserve things that don't last.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Fair as a star"

POLYPTOTON

At the top of stanza 3, the poem uses polyptoton with the word "know" in order to emphasize its various meanings. The word

appears in two forms, both in line 9: "unknown" and "know," an adjective (technically, a participle) negated by the prefix "un-," and a verb. Before considering the words' layered meaning, the reader will probably notice how they resemble lines 3 and 4. There, in stanza 1 , "there were none to praise" Lucy "And very few to love her." Here, in line 9, "She lived unknown, and few could know" when she died. The word "know" deepens the degree to which Lucy lived anonymous and unappreciated. Not only did nobody praise her. Hardly anyone even *knew* her.

The word's repetition also sounds a bit like a justification. The speaker, considering that Lucy "lived unknown," can't blame people for not noticing when she died. "She lived so quietly and far away—how *could* anyone have known her?" the speaker seems to be asking.

At this point, the reader may start considering the word's various meanings. The first case is the more layered one. "[U]nknown" could mean a number of things. It could mean literally no one knew she existed. Or, that people knew her, but not well. This interpretation raises the possibility that not even the speaker knew her. Sure enough, in line 6 the speaker admits that Lucy was "Half hidden from the eye," meaning she had a mysterious quality that persisted despite, presumably, time spent with her and attempts to "get to know" her. Finally, "unknown" could refer to Lucy's virginity, since "know," in an archaic sense, means "to have sex with." The word "Maid" in line 3, whose archaic meaning also implies virginity, supports this reading.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "unknown," "know"

PARALLELISM

In stanzas 1 and 2, parallelism links descriptions of Lucy, contributing to the poem's nursery-rhyme quality and commenting on the speaker's struggle to remember and represent Lucy.

There are two parallel phrases in question:

1. "A Maid whom there were none to praise / And very few to love"
2. "A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!"

Both describe Lucy, and they appear back-to-back, linking stanza 1 with stanza 2. Each phrase starts with a description that names Lucy, in a sense (in the first, she's a "Maid," and in the second she's a "violet"). The second clause ("And very few to love" and "Half hidden from the eye") complicates that introductory description. The reader can think of it as a "complicating clause."

The first effect of the similar syntax is to emphasize the poem's rhythm, which sounds straight out of a nursery rhyme. This formal quality is curious in a poem about grief. It's as if the speaker is trying to conceal, or at least control, his or her sadness with the steady, almost happy beat. This particular repetition and poem's general measuredness also, however, remind the reader that the cycle of loving and losing is so universal that it can fit into what sounds like a readymade form.

The parallelism also reveals something about the relationship between the literal and metaphorical in the poem. The first phrase describes Lucy literally. While she lived, "there were none to praise" her and "very few" people loved her. Yes, these lines have metaphorical qualities as well. Praise, for example, can mean a few different things. But more than anything else, they sound like a statement of fact. And that fact—ignorance of Lucy—is exactly what necessitates the metaphorical language of stanza 2.

The reader will notice right away that line 5 is metaphorical; there's not much evidence out there to suggest that the speaker thought of Lucy as a *literal flower*. This metaphor follows the colon that end-stops line 4. It is a direct response to that first description of Lucy, as if the speaker were attempting to make up for how unappreciated Lucy was with a demonstration of love and admiration. With the complicating clause in line 6 ("Half hidden from the eye"), the speaker implies why he or she *has* to use metaphor to describe Lucy. She had an inherent mystery about her, and therefore can't be rendered with purely literal description.

The parallelism also expresses the power of the speaker's metaphorical strategy. In stanza 1, the complicating clause worsens a sorry situation: Lucy was unappreciated *and* unloved. In stanza 2, however, it conveys the speaker's wonder. Lucy was "Half hidden from the eye!" the speaker exclaims. This metaphor is a triumph. Far from alienating the reader from Lucy, her mystery was the source of their love.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "A Maid whom there were none to praise / And very few to love:"
- **Lines 5-6:** "A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs sparingly throughout the poem, and for the most part simply emphasizes the alliterative words. There are two types of alliteration in this poem however, obvious and subtle, and each works slightly differently. To be clear, "obvious" and "subtle" are not technical terms; they just reflect that some alliteration in the poem isn't immediately obvious, while other alliteration is.

In general, the subtle alliteration creates an atmosphere has to

do with certain feelings. In stanza 1, alliteration between "dwelt" and "Dove" (enhanced by more /d/ consonance in "beside," "untrodden," and "Maid") gives the description of Lucy's "untrodden ways" a solid feeling. The firm, closed /d/ sounds resemble solid objects with clear edges. Lucy, they convey, was a real person, and the speaker can point to where she lived. Lucy's realness adds weight to the speaker's grief.

In stanza 2, "stone," "star," and "sky" imitate Lucy's fleeting quality. The /s/ sounds echo softly throughout the stanza, as if streaming by in the wind. They describe something "Half hidden," just out of reach. This /h/ alliteration is more obvious: it delivers a concentrated message to the reader that says, "This line phrase is important." The alliteration here is clear, and as such, for a moment, all the reader's attention pours into the words. It flags this concept of being half-hidden as central to the poem, encouraging the reader to puzzle over its meaning.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d"
- **Line 2:** "D"
- **Line 4:** "v"
- **Line 5:** "v," "s," "t"
- **Line 6:** "H," "h"
- **Line 7:** "s," "t"
- **Line 8:** "s"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs throughout the poem, but it is usually subtle. For instance, note the /uh/ sound in "of Dove" in line 2, or the long /i/ of "violet by" in line 5. These moments add a bit of lyrical flourish to the poem, enhancing its musicality. They also echo the poem's end rhymes, making those final sounds ring out all the more clearly throughout the stanzas. The /uh/ sound in "of Dove" returns in line 3's "none" and line 4's "love," while the /i/ of "violet by" repeats in the end rhyme sounds in "eye" and "sky."

What this means is that the poem is loaded with internal rhymes that are obvious—obvious, because the end rhymes are a clear reference point. These internal rhymes enhance the poem's sing-song quality and build a network of keywords that bear on the poem's main themes. Internal rhyme and assonance are different techniques—assonance typically refers only to words that appear very close to one another—but the assonance primes the reader's ear for those internal rhymes, and they're worth discussing together.

To return to stanza 1, the assonance between the end rhymes and intra-line words emphasize that Lucy, despite being beautiful and virtuous, was unappreciated. Again, those words are "of Dove," "none," and "love." The role "none" and "love" play in emphasizing this theme is fairly obvious: Lucy was totally lovely, but nevertheless no one noticed. "Dove" refers to the Dove River, but also recalls the bird, a symbol of peace and modest beauty. And "among" fits into the group as well. Though it doesn't represent the theme, it does prime the reader's ear for the similar sounds to come.

Taking another look at stanza 2, an /i/ sound links "violet by" to "eye," "shining," and "sky." There is an almost painful intensity to these sounds. They might rise up as parts of the speaker's plaintive wail. Aside from the effect of the sound, the words stand out due to their similarity, and like those linked by assonance in stanza 1, these words are pretty important. They describe what Lucy was like (a "violet"), how she behaved (she shone like a star), and point to the limits the speaker will go to in his or her attempts to express Lucy's mystery: the speaker will look to the "sky."

In stanza 3, /o/ sounds add a final mournful note to the poem. Lucy was "unknown," hardly anyone could "know" when she died, and the speaker expresses his or her grief with soft apostrophe: "oh." These sounds require a rounding of the lips, a preparation for singing praise, or howling in grief. But this sound of grieving is softer than the /i/ sounds from stanza 2. The speaker finally admits that Lucy is dead (she "ceased to be" and "is in her grave"), and that acceptance is reflected in the sound of his or her language.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "o," "o"
- **Line 3:** "ai," "ai"
- **Line 5:** "i," "y"
- **Line 8:** "i," "y"
- **Line 9:** "ow," "ow"
- **Line 10:** "y," "ea," "e"
- **Line 11:** "e," "i," "i"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears quite a bit in the poem. Each case emphasizes and deepens the meanings of the consonant words, while also adding to the poem's musicality.

In stanza 1, for instance, /d/ sounds link "dwelt," "untrodden," "Maid," and "Beside" to convey Lucy's contradictory nature. The /d/ sound itself, which is solid, heavy, and closed, contributes to the sense of Lucy as a rooted person with clearly identifiable attributes. She lived, or "dwelt," in a very real place; the speaker gets specific enough to explain that she lived by the head of the Dove River. The words also refer to physical space. In order to have "dwelt," Lucy had to have been somewhere. "[U]ntrodden" refers to a place people might pass over. And "Beside" locates her geographically.

These words also, however, emphasize Lucy's ungraspable quality. First, "dwelt" is a rather vague word; it doesn't describe how Lucy actually spent her time. "[U]ntrodden," of course, refers to the fact that no one really knew Lucy well enough to

report on what her life was like. And "Beside" places Lucy in the margin, out of sight (it serves the same purpose as "by" in line 5).

Later, in stanza 3, the /w/ sounds among "unknown," "few," and "know" work with the stanza's assonance to enhance its mournful tone. Like the assonant /o/ sounds, the /w/ sounds require a rounding of the lips. One might round their lips to sing a song of remembrance or howl in grief. The speaker's grief is a bit more muted than a howl (notice the softness of the apostrophized "oh"), but the sounds certainly encourage the reader to participate in that grief by literally forming the words. This stanza, too, is notably the first to actually reveal Lucy's name, which is linked via /s/ consonance to the word "ceased." As soon as Lucy fully appears in the poem, then, she is gone, "ceasing" to be.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "t," "t," "dd"
- **Line 2:** "s," "d," "s," "D"
- **Line 3:** "M," "d," "m," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 4:** "v," "v"
- **Line 5:** "v," "ss," "s"
- **Line 6:** "H," "f," "h," "f"
- **Line 7:** "F," "r," "r," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 8:** "n," "n"
- **Line 9:** "d," "n," "w," "n," "w," "d," "n," "w"
- **Line 10:** "W," "c," "c," "s," "b"
- **Line 11:** "B," "r," "r"

ENJAMBMENT

Five of the poem's twelve lines are, arguably, enjambed. These moments either enhance Lucy's mystery, imitate the speaker's emotion, or reflect Lucy's hanging fate (though it's pretty clear from the start that she's dead, the speaker doesn't say it outright until line 10).

The enjambment between lines 1 and 2, for example, enhances Lucy's mystery. The first statement about her—"She dwelt among untrodden ways"—is vague and full of intrigue. What does it mean that she "dwelt"? the reader might ask. If the place where she lived was "untrodden," will there be any way of fully answering that question? The end of the line poses these questions, which hang in the unpunctuated zone, an open space that may build hope in the reader that the next line will answer them (of course, it doesn't).

The enjambment that ends line 3 might be read as reflecting the speaker's emotion. The speaker considers Lucy's anonymity a real shame. It's painful enough to admit "there were none to praise" her (especially considering that the speaker is just as culpable), but even more painful to admit that so few people loved her. At the end of line 3, "praise" hangs free, ready for enjambment. It's as if the speaker hesitates for a moment before going on to describe the full extent of Lucy's tragic situation.

And at the end of line 9, enjambment imitates another of the speaker's hesitations, one the speaker has been making the whole poem: to admit that Lucy is dead. Of course, it's clear from the past-tense references to her that she is dead, but the speaker can't bring him- or herself to say it outright until line 10 ("Lucy ceased to be"). As the final moment before the admission, line 9 lingers in the memory of Lucy in life. It's probably not a coincidence that this line, graphically, is the longest in the poem. It stretches farther than any other, extending Lucy's sweet, lively virtue as long as possible.

All that said, it's worth noting that none of these enjambments are particularly strong. Though these lines lack punctuation, they don't splice phrase in half; instead, the second part of the enjambed lines typically serves to *enhance* the meaning of the prior lines rather than reveal that meaning altogether. Line 3, for instance, might even be thought of as end-stopped by some readers, since "A Maid whom there were none to praise" is a complete, coherent thought; "And very few to love" adds to that thought, but it arguably makes sense in its own right. Recall that these terms are not an exact science, and that what's important here is understanding the general feeling of the poem, and how that feeling enhances or complicates its thematic ideas.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "ways / Beside"
- **Lines 3-4:** "praise / And"
- **Lines 5-6:** "stone / Half"
- **Lines 7-8:** "one / Is"
- **Lines 9-10:** "know / When"

CAESURA

The poem has a few cases of caesura. They first appear midway through the poem. Toward the end, there's a cluster that represents the speaker's increasingly overwhelmed emotion.

The first caesura, in line 7, slows the pace of the poem so that the reader can better appreciate the lone star's beauty. "Fair as a star, when only one," the line reads. First, the comma encourages the reader to consider the simile. In what ways are both Lucy and the star fair, or beautiful? For the speaker, this pause represents a respectful and awed acknowledgement of Lucy's beauty. The speaker is basking in the starlight and simply doesn't want it to end. The comma also divides two key phrases—"Fair as a star" and "when only one"—so that the reader can see that they work both together and separately. The "only one" refers primarily to the star, and therefore Lucy, but it might also refer to the speaker, who may be the "only one" who actually loved Lucy.

The caesura in line 9 also represents a pause on the part of the

speaker, but the reason for pausing is different. Rather than dwell in Lucy's beauty, the speaker avoids admitting what the speaker finally does in line 10: that "Lucy ceased to be." In that sense, the comma imitates the speaker's swollen throat, the choking up, the hesitant attempt to hold back tears.

Finally, in line 11, caesura appears in a cluster: "But she is in her grave, and, oh." Again, the speaker hesitates, slows things down. The last word is important, and the speaker wants to get it right. So here, the caesura represents the speaker's care in delivering the final word on Lucy—"The difference to me!"—a young woman who, as the speaker has clearly demonstrated, deserved the best.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “,” “,”

APOSTROPHE

In line 11, the speaker uses an apostrophe to prepare for the poem's final exclamation. The apostrophe—"oh"—is notable for its softness. Often apostrophes include capital letters and an exclamation mark ("Oh!"), but in this case, the speaker's appeal to some outside listener is more muted. Rather than diminish its power, however, this modesty complicates the "oh."

One interpretation reads it like and "Oh!" The word is a shout of pure emotion, a release of pent-up energy. A more careful interpretation, however, takes into account the moment's quietness. Here, the "oh" is more of a hesitation. The speaker is treading carefully. At the end of a poem about a young woman who didn't get the attention she deserved, the speaker wants to do her memory justice. In that sense, the "oh" is a thoughtful pause in which the speaker considers how to proceed. "Oh," the speaker seems to be saying, "I'm not sure how exactly to put it." Or: "Let me pause for a second—I want to get this right."

Whatever the case, the final effect of the muted apostrophe is to contrast with and therefore emphasize the final line. The apostrophe, in combination with line 11's caesura cluster, slows the pace of the poem, such that the unhindered final line explodes to its exclamatory point. That, the poem suggests, is one of Lucy's effects: to instantly transport her lovers (the few that existed) from quiet hesitation to the resounding certainty that she changed their lives.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** “oh”

VOCABULARY

Dwelt (Line 1) - “Dwelt” is the slightly outdated version of “dwelled,” which is the past tense of “dwell.” Dwell has two principal meanings. The first is physical: it means to live in a specific place. The second is mental: it means to focus thought for an extended period on one thing. During her life, Lucy dwelled in the physical sense in the “untrodden” English countryside. In the mental sense, the poem’s speaker dwells on the subject of Lucy.

Untrodden (Line 1) - “Untrodden” refers to a surface that has not been trodden over, or walked on (“trodden” is the past participle of the verb “tread,” which means walk). In that sense, it specifically refers to Lucy’s home, which was remote and therefore unknown by the general public, a place where, literally, few people walked. Like “dwelt,” it also has a more metaphorical meaning—untrodden can refer to a place where not only few people have been, but that few people have thought about.

Springs (Line 2) - In its most general sense, “springs” refers to a place where water emerges. A spring is a place on the surface of the earth where water naturally appears, or springs up. In the poem, the word refers to the source of the Dove River (on Axe Edge Moor, which is near Buxton, England), the place where the water rises from the earth and begins its southward course.

Dove (Line 2) - “Dove” refers to the Dove River, which is the main river in the Midlands of England. (The head of the river is about 30 miles south of Manchester.)

Maid (Line 3) - “Maid,” in its contemporary sense, refers to a female house servant. However, in its archaic sense—the one that’s used in the poem—it refers to an unmarried young woman. Lucy, therefore, died young and unmarried, two characteristics that emphasize her status as being unloved and little-praised during her lifetime. Maid is an abbreviation of maiden, which comes from a Germanic word meaning maid or virgin.

Praise (Line 3) - To “praise” someone or something is to express appreciation, admiration, respect, and/or love for that person or thing. In the poem it appears as a verb, though praise can also be a noun, as in, “Lucy received little praise.” Both the verb and noun can have a religious meaning, too. In that case, to praise Lucy would be to recognize her as a figure worthy of worship.

Violet (Line 5) - A violet is a delicate flower whose petals are typically blue, purple, or white, though purple is the color most commonly associated with the flower. The color purple represents many things, but in the poem it’s most strongly connected to fanciful products of the imagination and arresting beauty (though it should be noted that the violet, which represents Lucy, would be even more obviously arresting if it

didn't have to live in the shadow of a "mossy stone").

Fair (Line 7) - "Fair" has a number of meanings. First, it means beautiful; it refers to Lucy's beauty. (That meaning is a bit outdated, but this poem is exactly the sort of place where it might be found.) Second, it means light-colored, or blonde. In this sense it could refer to Lucy's complexion, though it most obviously refers to the single star shining in the evening sky, with which the speaker compares Lucy.

Unknown (Line 9) - "Unknown" means, well, unknown: obscure, mysterious, remote, hidden, etc. In reference to Lucy, it has three main meanings. First, Lucy was unknown in the sense that nobody knew her—as in, nobody knew her as a friend. Second, she was unknown in the sense that nobody was aware of her even existing, as in, "no one had heard of her." Third, since Lucy was a "Maid," which in its outdated sense implies that she was a virgin, the reader can interpret "know" in its archaic sense, which means to have sex with someone.

Lucy (Line 10) - Lucy is the object of the speaker's love and mourning. She is the "Fair," "Half hidden," "unknown" young woman who the speaker talks about for the whole poem. Wordsworth wrote four other "Lucy poems," in which he mourns a young woman who died young (he uses the name Lucy in all but "A Slumber Did my Spirit Steal," though for thematic similarities critics have lumped it into the grouping). However, he never explicitly intended for them to be read sequentially, and was famously quiet about who Lucy actually represented.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" is a ballad, a fairly flexible form. Though ballads are typically longer and narrative, this one is brief and lyrical (indeed, it appeared in a book called *Lyrical Ballads*). It is divided into three quatrains, or four-line stanzas. It can be said to contain a narrative—Lucy lived, was unknown, and died—but it's slight, and the title pretty much gives it away (Lucy "dwelt," but doesn't dwell). Instead, despite its nursery-rhyme steadiness, the poem is dominated by a mournful tone. In that way, it can also be looked at as an elegy.

Therefore, the poem is both: a ballad that sounds like an elegy. The poem is balladic in terms of both form and content. Formally, its steady rhymes and meter give it a sound that fits its origins. The English ballad is derived from a French form called *chanson balladée*, which rhymed and was set to dancing and music. It might be hard to imagine anyone clicking heels to this poem, but the reader can certainly imagine it appearing in a book of nursery rhymes, which have a musical quality to them. Content-wise, as mentioned, it has a slight narrative, and it also takes the reader on a short journey through the British countryside.

The poem is elegiac in that it mourns Lucy. It is very clearly about the loss of a loved one. The entire time, Lucy is referred to in the past tense, and the final stanza explicitly mentions her death: "Lucy ceased to be" and "is in her grave." But the poem isn't simply elegiac for the fact of mentioning Lucy's death. It's elegiac for the tone of the speaker, who regrets not having more fully appreciated Lucy in life, and feels deeply the "difference" wrought by her death.

METER

The 12-line poem follows iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line, meaning eight syllables total) in its odd-numbered lines and iambic trimeter (three iambs, six syllables) in its even-numbered lines. This structure—alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter—is pretty typical of English ballads. For example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was published in the same book as "She Dwelt," has the same meter.

For most of the lines, the meter is perfect. The iambs (da DUM) are obvious and the poem clops evenly forward. Combined with the AB rhyme scheme, this steady meter gives the poem the sound of a nursery rhyme.

The few breaks from uniformity, however, are worth paying attention to, and they start with line 1, which is notable for two related reasons. One, it has an extra syllable (nine instead of eight). Two, it can be read according to two different meters, which come down to how the reader pronounces "untrodden."

> She dwelt among the untrodden ways

This is the first way, with "untrodden" proceeding stressed, unstressed, unstressed. Up until "untrodden," the line moves with its given meter. Untrodden disrupts the meter, drawing attention to itself. And it's important that it do so: untrodden is the poem's key word, pointing to Lucy's loneliness, mysteriousness, and untouched, hidden beauty. As a word that contains so much, it is worth lingering over, and so is its meter. Another way of reading the line is like this:

> She dwelt among the untrodden ways

The only difference is where the stress falls in untrodden, but it slightly alters the effect of the line. In the first, the negative prefix "un-" receives emphasis. In the second, "trod," an action, receives emphasis. The speaker, though lamenting in the poem what *didn't* happen while Lucy lives, also uses the poem as a chance to do some memory-trodding (or walking), to actively occupy the untouched space that Lucy did.

Later, in line 6, the speaker breaks from the meter again.

> Half hidden from the eye!

Though this line follows iambic trimeter, it somewhat hides it—with the word "hidden." The word's first syllable is stressed, but drawing it out to perfectly complete the iamb started by "Half" would sound unnatural. Hidden is a fast two syllables whose sound quickly escapes. This line, which describes that mysterious something about Lucy, resists the metrical mold that it seems, on first glance, to fit. The next line also describes Lucy; it too breaks metrical convention.

—Fair as a star, when only one

Here, the first foot is reversed: it's a trochee (DA dum) rather than an iamb (da DUM). The rest of the syllables recuperate the standard, but in a line so short, one odd foot makes all the difference. In this case, it emphasizes "Fair," which refers to Lucy's beauty. So, the stressed words/syllables in the line are: Fair, star, on-, and one. The line's point is as clear as can be. No one is fair like Lucy was (or is, in the speaker's memory).

The last line worth noting is, well, the last line:

The dif- | fer**ence** | to **me!**

There's nothing funky going on here—this line is purely iambic—but the meter does present "difference" in a way that normal speech does not. Typically, "difference" is pronounced as two syllables, unless the speaker is part of an easy spelling bee or wants to sound refined. Here, one of the poem's most important words gets credit for all its syllables. The meter stretches it out, in the mouth of the speaker, who feels its pain, and the ear of the reader, who should consider what, in this case, the word actually means.

RHYME SCHEME

"She Dwelt among the Uncommon Ways" follows a straightforward rhyme scheme:

ABAB

To be as clear as possible, though, it should be noted that the rhyming sounds change each stanza. Because the poem is short, its scheme can be fully represented here: ABAB CDCD EFEF

This fairly basic scheme gives the poem a nursery-rhyme quality that matches its content, as if Lucy, a "Maid," lived all alone in a fairytale land. A few alterations, however, stave off the slumber that perfect, regular rhymes might induce in the reader. For example, there is one case of slant rhyme: "stone" does not rhyme perfectly with "one." Since it comes first, "stone" sets the rhyme. "[O]ne," therefore, is responsible for breaking it. As the culprit, "one" receives attention; as a word that emphasizes both Lucy's isolation and her unique beauty, it deserves that attention.

Internal rhyme also emphasizes "one," which rhymes across the distance with "none" from stanza 1. This connection would seem to highlight the speaker's role in the poem. While Lucy lived, *none* praised her. The poem, however, is certainly a form of praise, and the speaker is the *one* person responsible for it. With it, the speaker seems to be making amends for not having adequately appreciated Lucy in life. Though "one" refers to the star, and therefore Lucy, it recalls one of the poem's main messages, that so long as there's one person to appreciate Lucy's beauty and virtue, it will have mattered, and will continue to matter.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is anonymous, genderless, and uses a first-person pronoun only once ("me," the final word of the poem), but nevertheless conveys strong emotions that tell the reader about his or her character.

One of the first things the reader will notice is that the speaker describes him- or herself indirectly. That is, the speaker describes how other people *are* in order to show how the speaker *is not*. For example, there were "very few to love" Lucy. Later, the speaker says that "few could know" when Lucy died. In both cases, the implication is clear: that the speaker counts among the few. So, the reader knows that the speaker loved Lucy.

In some ways, however, the speaker is like everyone else. While Lucy lived, "there were none to praise" her. By using the word "none," the speaker suggests that even the speaker, too, failed to praise Lucy in her lifetime. The speaker admits a mistake, and a strain of regret enters the poem's mournful tone. Lucy was also "unknown." Now, this doesn't necessarily mean unknown *by all*, but it prompts the reader to wonder whether the speaker really did know Lucy, in a deep sense. She was, after all, "Half hidden from the eye"—even the few who loved her didn't fully understand her.

Pretty much every other moment in the poem supports this image of the speaker as someone who loved and deeply cared for Lucy. In stanza 2, the descriptions of the violet and the star show that the speaker paid close enough attention to Lucy in life to be permanently impressed by her beauty. And the speaker's final exclamation—"oh, / The difference to me!"—reinforces that sense of permanence. Lucy's loss, says the speaker, is something the speaker will never really get over.

SETTING

The reader might look at the poem as having two settings. One is more obvious: the physical setting of the British countryside—"the untrodden ways"—the place where Lucy lived and died. The second is the place from which the speaker remembers Lucy, which the poem only hints at.

The poem's title and first line tell the reader that the setting is

rural. "[U]ntrodden ways"—literally, pathways that few people have walked on—implies remoteness and a low population. To reinforce this impression, the second line comes in with a reference to a specific place. Lucy lived "Beside the springs of Dove," which refers to the starting point of the Dove River. The Dove River is located in central England, in a rural, somewhat mountainous region known as the Midlands. So now, the reader can very confidently say that Lucy lived in the country, though should also note that Manchester and Birmingham, two industrial centers, weren't *that* far away from the head of the Dove.

The second stanza adds detail to the rural setting. For example, the speaker calls Lucy "A violet by a mossy stone." Because the area is "untrodden," it seems, the violet has been spared a death by stomping boots. Lucy is also like a star. From that, the reader can assume the setting is a place where stars can be seen—a place with no or little light pollution.

The speaker, of course, is the one who supplies the images of the star and violet. It's reasonable to ask from where the speaker is doing so. One might argue that the speaker reflects on Lucy's death from the place where she lived, and that that's why the speaker is noticing these images. One could also argue, however, that the speaker is plucking the images from memory. The speaker refers throughout the poem to other people, everyone who didn't know or appreciate Lucy. The speaker may be mourning Lucy from a crowded place like a city. If so, then the speaker may also be mourning the loss of Lucy's rural surroundings.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wordsworth wrote "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" in 1798, when he was 28 years old and traveling in Germany with his sister, the poet Dorothy Wordsworth. This was the same year Wordsworth and his good friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, jointly published *Lyrical Ballads*, though "She Dwelt" first appeared in the second, 1800 edition of the book.

Lyrical Ballads is widely considered to have propelled the English Romantic movement into full flight. Most of its poems were written by Wordsworth; Coleridge contributed four (though to be fair, his most famous, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is pretty long). In *Lyrical Ballads*, the writers paid tribute to the natural world, describing its effect upon human emotion and sense of self. In his preface to the 1800 edition, Wordsworth describes the poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of feelings" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility."

1798 was the beginning of Wordsworth's "great decade," the term some critics use to refer to what they believe were his years of most valuable productivity. During that same trip to Germany with his sister, Wordsworth would draft the other four poems that appear in the group critics call the "Lucy Poems." In addition to "She Dwelt," they are "Strange Fits of Passion I have Known," "I Travelled among Unknown Men," "Three Years She Grew," and "A Slumber Did my Spirit Steal," all but the last of which mention Lucy by name. Some have proposed that Lucy represented Dorothy, others Wordsworth's muse (or generalized source of inspiration), and others Peggy Hutchinson, a childhood friend who died young and whose sister, Mary, Wordsworth eventually married. Wordsworth, however, never acknowledged the link between the poems, and when asked who Lucy might represent, kept quiet.

1798 was also the publication year of the novel *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, the unfinished and posthumously published sequel to feminist Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft had been married to the anarchist and writer William Godwin, and died eleven days after giving birth to their child, Mary, the future author of *Frankenstein* and wife to Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For Wordsworth in 1798, the most important event in recent history was probably the French Revolution, whose disorder, for the following decade, spread through Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa in a series of military conflicts. It was during this time that a French general named Napoleon Bonaparte made a name for himself during campaigns in Italy and Egypt. The king of England, King George III, sat warily on his throne, knowing that as France's military spread across the continent, so did the populist sentiment that had activated the revolution. In fact, in 1800—the same year "She Dwelt" was first published—the king survived two assassination attempts. Also in this year, England absorbed Ireland into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland through the Acts of Union 1800.

Wordsworth, a young man during the French Revolution and its aftermath, built much of his political thinking on what he'd learned from the French revolutionaries, whom he greatly admired. He was appalled by the Reign of Terror, however, and as he grew older and more conservative ended up rejecting much of his youthful idealism.

In English cities, the Industrial Revolution made the turn of the century was a time of major industrial and social development. Factories rose, darkening the skies and polluting the rivers, and workers got organized enough to start demanding more political and labor rights. Wordsworth would write many poems about city life in the coming years ("The world is too much with us," "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802"), but in *Lyrical Ballads* he limited himself almost entirely to nature. "She Dwelt" contains no explicit mention of city life or industry, though Lucy's home, near the

origin of the Dove River, wasn't too far from Manchester, a cotton-producing city transformed by the Industrial Revolution.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Preface to Lyrical Ballads — The LitChart guide for the preface to the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, in which Wordsworth develops one of the guiding poetical theories of the English Romantic movement. (https://www.litcharts.com/lit/preface-to-the-lyrical-ballads)
- Personal Essay about "She Dwelt" by a U.S. Novelist — A short personal essay about the poem by novelist Sabina Murray. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/09/10/william-wordsworths-she-dwelt-among-the-untrodden-ways/)
- 1839 Transcription of "She Dwelt" — A version of the poem transcribed by Wordsworth in 1839 for one "Lady Dell." (https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:86712)
- Sir Andrew Motion Reads "She Dwelt" — Contemporary English knight and poet Andrew Motion reads the poem and shares a personal anecdote about it. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXHyWkXNE3Y)
- William Wordsworth's Biography — A biography from the Poetry Foundation detailing Wordsworth's career, personal relationships, political thinking, and poetical theories. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- The Solitary Reaper
- The World Is Too Much With Us

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