

**A Structuralist Analysis of Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from
Recollections of Early Childhood***

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Abstract

Romantic imagination is against any fixation of form and rules and regulations but any creative attempt, however anti-rule it may be, must have some underlying principles governing its structure. This article explores Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* from a structuralist perspective. Structuralism with its roots in Ferdinand de Saussure's structural view of language sees cultural phenomena and literary endeavors as structured based on the underlying rules governing the writing of the creative work. This article joins two contradictory ideas: Romantic poetry which glorifies the author's subjectivity and structuralism which believes in the death of the author. However, this article analyzes the ode from a structuralist perspective and principles of criticism: parallels and echoes, reflections and repetitions, contrasts, and patterns of language and imagery. It also studies the Ode's relationship with the tradition of the genre and its differences from and similarities to other odes.

Keywords: Ode, Wordsworth, Structuralism, Romanticism, English literature

Introduction: Traditional Approach to Ode

J. A. Cuddon defines ode as "[a] lyric poem, usually of some length. The main features are an elaborate stanza structure, a marked formality and stateliness in tone and style (which make it ceremonious), and lofty sentiments and thoughts" (1998, p. 608). Cuddon further divides this grand genre into "two basic kinds: the public and the private" (p. 608). The former is used for ceremonies like statements, funerals, and birthdays; the latter is meant for intense subjective expressions of meditative and reflective nature. Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington by Tennyson belongs to the public category and Keats' Ode to a Nightingale is a private ode (Cuddon, 1998).

Sappho (fl. c. 600 BC), Alcaeus (fl. c. 611-580 BC), and Pindar (522-442 BC) are Greek representatives of this genre. Pindar's odes "[m]odeled on the choric odes of the Greek drama" (Cuddon, p. 608) implied high seriousness of the genre for him. Horace (65-8 BC), Pindar's Latin counterpart, created odes of personal nature, regular stanza form, and limited metrical patterns. The Italian canzone developed as a European genre closer to ode defined by Dante as a composition "in the tragic style, of equal stanzas without choral interludes, concerning one subject" (Cuddon, p. 608). Spencer employed this genre in Epithalmion (1595) and Prothalmion (1596) with majestic loftiness (Cuddon, 1998). It was Abraham Cowley who in his Pindaric Odes dispensed with the strophic patterns in favor of varied and flexible meters and lines to influence the latter writers greatly (Cuddon, 1998).

In the 18th century, Pope's *Ode on Solitude* is in Horation style and *Ode for Music on St. Cecilia's Day* follows Pindaric mode. Collins and Gray also produced masterly odes in the 18th c. They experimented with metrical arrangement and variety and versatility of the genre. Romantic Age richly served the genre: the masterpieces from this era include S.T. Coleridge's *France* (1798) and *Dejection: An Ode* (1802); Wordsworth's sublime *Ode on Intimations* (1802-4); P.B Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* (1819); and then John Keats's six magnificent odes (c. 1819): *Ode on a Grecian Urn*; *Ode to a Nightingale*; *Ode to Autumn*; *Ode on Melancholy*; *Ode on Indolence*; and *Ode to Psyche*.

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From the above discussion, the following features of ode can be derived: Tragic and hence sublime style ii- high seriousness iii- loftiness and majesty iv- elaborate rules v- formality and decorum vi- flexibility and versatility in later specimens

Roots and History of Structuralism

Structuralism emanated from Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) linguistic theory that replaced diachrony with synchrony implying that a language at any given time functions because of its system. His *Course de Linguistique Generale* (1915) provided the basis of 20th-century linguistics and ultimately paved the way for structuralist criticism as well. In its vastness, the theory encompasses all human modes of communication like traffic lights, smoke, fire, clothes, a railway timetable, a menu. Elements of a system have arbitrary relationships that make intelligibility of meaning and communication possible. This approach formulated the vision of Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist who coined the term structuralism (Buchbinder, 1991, p.54) and his influence then reached Levi Strauss who following Saussure's footsteps, explored many myths of various cultures of the world to get at the langue, the system functioning behind individual myths. Both language and myths are two different – but similar in modes of function – ways of classifying the world internalized unconsciously. Following Levi-Strauss's structuralist analysis of myths, Vladimir Propp (1968), a Russian linguist, studied the langue of fairy tales in *Morphology of Folktales* and found their 31 elements varyingly employed by all folk tales. Tzvetan Todorov, (1975) a Bulgarian narratologist, conceived all stories as extended grammatical sentences. He thinks that narrative's langue can be discovered by looking into it as an extension of a sentence in which somebody (subject) does something (verb) to somebody (object) somewhere somehow (adverbs). Leech finds the basis of structuralist critique in human understanding of the world: human beings segment the continuum of time and space artificially and correspondingly their artifacts, devise their cultural practices, and treat time (past/present/future) according to their understanding of Nature (as cited in Buchbinder, 1991, p.37).

Observing the link between linguistics and structuralism, Genette (1997) defines the purpose of the structuralist project was the configuration of the poetics of the system of literature; as linguistics exposes the conventions of a language that make it work, the function of this poetics is to study the literary conventions that make literary works function (p. 8). The focus of structuralism is not to explain individual works; it formulates general principles running through literary genres. C.S. Peirce (1839-14), the American pioneer of semiotics, took up Saussure's ideas and developed his view of language as a sign system (Yakina & Totu, 2014). Claude Levi-Strauss applied structuralist theory to myths, rituals, and kinships in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), and *Anthropology Structurale* (1958). Structuralism in the hands of Roland Barthes (1975) became a tool of 'grammar' and 'syntax' of food and clothes which functions in the same way as language. A particular menu is structured like a sentence.

Eagleton (1996) comments that structuralism "is concerned with structures", or better to say, with the laws (p. 82) that govern those structures that make them stand and work as identifiable units. Various elements of a structure are not meaningful in separately; their relationship makes them signify. It echoes Saussure's claim that language has only differences: language at every level – from phoneme to discourse – functions because of this system of differences. These relationships differentiate 'pat', 'apt' and 'tap' despite the same phonemes. Structuralism is interested in the literariness of literature, not the meaning of literature. It focuses on the conventions that constitute literariness which in turn by their function construct literary meaning (Goring, Hawthorne, & Mitchell, 2001, p.163).

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Placement of Ode on Intimations in the Tradition

One of the central principles of structuralism is that elements of a genre do not stand in isolation; they have a varying relationship with other specimens of that genre. Saussure's synchrony applied to literature means that all the specimens of a genre or a sub-genre are interrelated and interconnected. For instance, John Donne's morning song "Good Morrow" should not be seen as a poem in isolation: it can find its definition and significance with the traditional albas i.e. morning songs which signified separation between lovers at the end of the night of love and revelry. Donne reverses the pattern of the traditional morning song; here the end of the night is not the end of the relationship. Rather, the

“[b]usy old Sunne” is chided for ‘unruly’ interference into the privacy of the lovers because lovers’ seasons are not bound to follow his motions (2010).

Jonathan Culler (1975) comments that literary poetics is concerned with the implicit mechanism and the conventions that help a reader understand the work, not with the intelligibility of work itself. Culler places the intelligibility of a literary work in the ‘literary competence’ of the reader, rather than in the rules that govern the constitution of a text. Hence, Wordsworth’s *Ode on Intimations* should not be seen as meaningful separate from its relationship with other traditional models of the genre. Meaning comes from difference. Saussure (2011) observes that in language there are no positive terms; there are only differences. At every level of language, – phonemic, phrasal, clausal, sentential, and ultimately semantic levels – it is a difference that creates meaning. Plosiveness is the differentiating and therefore significant feature between /p/ and /b/, /pace/ and /base/ and so on. For him, the meaning is relational and results from differences. As signs are differential, conventional, and arbitrary, Saussure derived that instead of the study of isolated elements of language, the study of the system of their relationships makes sense (Bressler, 1994, p. 62). For instance, individual words cannot mean by themselves. Language is a system of systems in which every entity of different systems – phonemes in the sound system of language, words in the lexical system, word combinations in the phrasal, clause, and sentential system – is interrelated with other entities and their relationships (of and through differences) produce meaning. To understand the function of language, we need to study langue, the system, not parole, individual utterances. This approach forms the basis of semiology, the science of signs he pioneered, which studies the creation of meaning through signs in socio-behavioral patterns and systems.

Assumptions of Structuralist Critique of Literature

Borrowing insight from Saussure’s linguistic theory, structuralists claim that “codes, signs and rules govern all human, social and cultural practices” and like other social phenomena – communication, education, the language of sports, dressing, menus – literature is also rule-governed systematic organization of codes/signs (Bressler, 1994, p. 63). The implication is that literature, like language, is a self-sufficient system of rules, independent from any external referents. This demystified version of literature grabs interpretive project from the elitist few and equips a ‘common interpreter’ with the following methodological claims:

- (i). A literary text should be analyzed in the context of the conventions of the genre of that text;
- (ii). Meaning is possible through a shared system of relations;
- (iii). Meaning is intertextual, not text-specific because neither isolated authors nor isolated texts carry any importance in the process of signification;
- (iv). The author does not govern the text; the system of signs governs the author;
- (v). The meaning of a literary piece lies in the interplay of its various constituting elements, not in a ‘theme’ separately imposed upon it by an outside authority or independently emerging from it.
- (vi). A narrative is “a complex of recurrent patterns or motifs” (Barry, 2002, p. 49).

Structuralism, unlike liberal humanism, does not go straight into the issues/themes/central idea(s) of the text; it traces the structure or the design that emerges out of the patterns of symbols and motifs. Peter Barry offers the following elements to a structuralist critic to view and critique in a fictional narrative:

Parallels		Plot
Echoes		Structure
Reflections/Repetitions	in	Character/Motive
Contrast		Situation/Circumstance
Patterns		Language/Imagery

I have used this model for the structuralist analysis of *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* through Barry gave this model for the analysis of fiction because parallels, echoes, repetitions, contrasts, and patterns of language and imagery are visible in poetry as well.

Paradox of Imagination

The contrastive structural principle runs through all the Romantic imagination. Cleanth Brooks (1959) in “Wordsworth and the Paradox of Imagination” aptly point out the foundational structural principles of the creative works of Romantic poets. William Blake developed his imaginative frame through

contrastive complementary entities of 'innocence' and 'experience'. The principle also functions at a microcosmic level in the individual poems where 'babe' and 'old folk', 'lion and lamb' 'church and garden', sun-flower and worm, the laborer boy and the angelic boy, and so on. Jack Stillinger gives the following diagram to show the contrastive principle of John Keats's odes and this is thematic as well as structural principle:

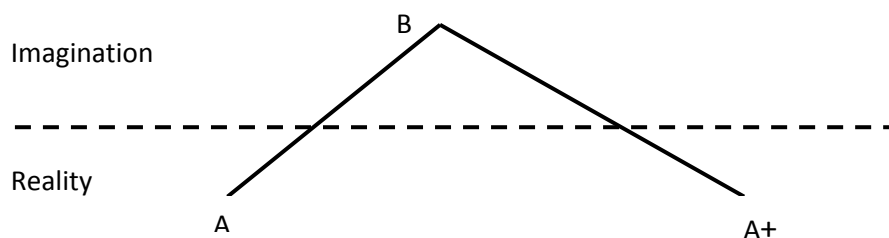


Figure 1: Stillinger's (1968) Diagram for Keats' Creative Process

Explaining the ideal and the actual worlds of the diagram, Stillinger comments that the two worlds have a lot in common: the heaven and the earth, immortal and mortal, eternal and temporal, spiritual and material, the unknown and the known, the infinite and the finite, romantic and the real (1968, p. 3). What Stillinger considers a characteristic feature of a romantic lyric applies to Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations* as well: "The protagonist in a Romantic lyric flies from the real world to the ideal one, from A to B, but he returns primarily because he finds the B world lacking something (1968, p. 3). The difference of Keats is that he wants something missing in the ideal and returns to the actual for compensation whereas Wordsworth finds the actual dissatisfying and takes refuge in the ideal lost childhood recovered imaginatively in *We are Seven*, *Two April Mornings*, *Ode on Intimations*, and finally in *The Prelude*. In *The Prelude*, for instance, the contrastive structural principle, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, runs through the poetic narrative: the babe grows from 'mute dialogues with mother's heart' to the mature phase when he will grow 'the chamois' sinews, and the eagle's wing. (Milnes & Tredell 2009)

The early days of the Babe and mother's mature being, early days (of the past) and broken winding ways (of the present), the delicacy of the Babe and "[t]he chamois' sinews, and the eagle's wing", augmented intercourse of touch and fear, internal reality (dialogues with mother's heart) and external reality (broken windings): this randomly chosen verse paragraph from *The Prelude* demonstrates contrast as the foundation of the development of Wordsworthian poetic narrative.

Comparing Shelley and Wordsworth in their stylistic expressions, Ridenour brings out contrast as the structural principle in that Wordsworth gives heightened statements in quite unusual bland expression while Shelley makes very enthusiastic statements on unexpectedly sober occasions (1980, p. 6). Though he continues to qualify his observation that "this is [not] simply a matter of imposing a "poetic" tone on the unlikely subject matter" and the poets have greater claims to make, yet the centrality of the contrast as a structural principle is undeniable. Also, from a tiresome and frustrating world:

[W]here men sit and hear each other groan
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs (Keats, 2012, p. 293).

Keats flights into the world of fullness, Provencal song and dance, synaesthesiac world of many colors and fragrances rolled into one, all-encompassing experiencing the Nightingale's song.

Parallels in the Ode

Three major parallels form the structure of this ode: the child, the sun, the moon; the child and the man; childhood/vision and maturation/blindness. The sun and the moonlight up their surroundings with their light and enjoy their creation. Likewise, the child's eye throws the coloring of imagination onto the world and enjoys the charm. The relationship between these three phenomena makes the signification of the ode possible. The sun and the moon by their metaphoric suggestion lead to the Child, the central metaphor of Wordsworth that stands for transcendental subjectivity. As the Sun and the Moon interact with their environments, the child also 'speaks' to the pansy. When the child becomes a grown-up man, he loses the ability to interact with the plant and hence with other entities of Nature. Likewise, when the soft delicate Sun matures into noon, he is in his full dazzling light but has lost his morning delicacy.

Paradoxes in the Ode

Paradoxes are the binding girders of the structure of the ode that begins with a paradoxical statement: “Child is the father of man” (Brooks, 1959). As we grow mature, our insight weakens; sleeping is awakening and vice versa. Wordsworth, as a mature man, enters the world as a blind man because as a child he had eyes but now he has lost them: the Nature smiles but he cannot ‘see’ it; he can only ‘hear’ the ‘laughter’. Sense of sight is lost but a sense of hearing is intact. Cleanth Brooks points out that the situational paradox at the beginning of the poem: Wordsworth (2016) in his childhood could see “[m]eadow, grove, and stream [were]/ Appareled in celestial light” (p. 255) but this light was transient and evanescent. Despite the loss of eyesight, he “see[s] / The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee” (2016, Stanza iv, L 36-38). Seeing the laughter is again paradoxical synaesthesis blend of senses: laughter is audible and smile, visible.

The blind man’s hearing is ‘normal’ but paradoxical concerning his ability to see. Wordsworth laments that in the process of growing up he has lost the beauty of the world and the celestial light but all that beauty is- “To me *did seem*” (p. 255, emphasis added); and ii- all that beauty had “the freshness of a *dream*” (Stanza I, L. v). Both the italicized expressions suggest the unreality of the beauty, an idea in line with previous metaphors: the child, the sun, the moon. All this was just a “common sight” beautified by his child-like vision but he mourns as if something ‘real’ had been lost. Earth is motherly in her affection for the child but it turns out to be a ‘homely nurse’ who, by her very intimacy, makes the child lose the vision and his ability to fill common things with extraordinary beauty. Paradoxically, the mother's kindness very carefully deprives the child of the wisdom that man struggles to retrieve in his maturity.

Contrasts

Mourning and celebration make the central contrast of the ode. The poet’s wretched maturity bewails the loss of vision and ability to converse with Nature. Contrarily, now the poet enters Nature as a blind man who can only listen to Nature’s symphonies though it is offering the same harmonious profuseness that he once found in it: the chirping birds, the babe’s leaps in his mother’s lap, cataracts’ trumpets, and the lambs’ bleating. Consider the following list of contrasts in the ode:

The birds sing a joyous song	To me alone came a thought of grief
Awaking is Sleeping	Sleeping is awaking
The child is the father of man; he has the philosophy of harmony with Nature	A grown-up man is struggling to acquire the vision the baby is born with.
Mature man has become blind	Something still lives in our embers
A wedding or a festival	A mourning or a funeral
“humorous stage”	Down to palsied age

Something lost (see the discussion under the heading ‘Echoes’ for detail) is balanced by something that survives: “Truth that wake” never to perish; the truths that are never utterly destroyed despite all listless mad endeavors of Man (L. 155-160). And again in Stanza X, the poet consoles himself with “what remains behind,” the primal sympathy which once bestowed on man must always stay with him (L. 179-82).

Echoes

The loss of vision of the consistent echo of the ode: The initial expression “[t]he things ... I now can see no more” is an anaphoric explanation of “[t]here was a time in the beginning.” The second stanza reiterates the same loss: “That there hath passed away a glory from the earth” (p.256). In stanza IV both the child and the tree ‘speak of something that is gone’ (p.257). Antonomasiac names used for this loss are as follows: ‘a glory’ (stanza II, L.ix), ‘fled is the visionary gleam’ (Stanza IV, L. 22), ‘shadowy recollection’ (Stanza IX, L. 21), ‘remembrance of something fugitive’ (Stanza IX, L. 3-4).

Loss of 'something' which now consists of "first affections, / those shadowy recollections" (L. 148-49) echoes in stanza after stanza of the ode. This 'something' is sometimes suggested and sometimes given a vivid image from the world of nature. The first stanza announces that "[t]he things which I have seen I can no more" (L. 9) and then L. 18 laments that "[t]here hath passed away a glory from the earth." What expression of beauty the poet looks at takes him from joy to mourning: joyous song of birds (L. 19), bouncing young lambs, and the tabor's sound (L. 20) "bring him a thought of grief" (L. 22). "While Earth herself is adorning,/ This sweet May morning," he feels sullen because ‘a Tree’ and ‘a single’ field both “speak of something that is gone” (L. 53). And then the pansy at his feet repeats the same tale: “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the

dream?" (L. 56-57). "The youth, who daily farther from the east / Must travel, still is Nature Priest" (L. 71-72). 'Still' is simultaneously a consolation against and a mournful reminder of the loss that will prevail to the grown-up man who "perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day (L. 75-76). Then Earth makes the child 'her Inmate Man' so that he may "[f]orget the glories he hath known, / And that imperial palace whence he came" (L. 83-84). The child, "[a] six years' Darling of pigmy size" is fretted and favored by his mother's kisses and father's eyes but "it will not be long / Ere this be thrown aside, / And with new joy and pride / The little Actor cons another part" (L. 99-102). The child, unfortunately, takes 'earnest pains' to "provoke / The years to bring the inevitable yoke" (L. 123-124) and soon frosty, weighty 'earthy freight' will overtake him. Nature remembers 'something' that is "in our embers", something that "was so fugitive" (L. 129-32). Here nature is human nature as the following clause clarifies: "The thought of our past years in me doth breed / Perpetual benediction" (L. 133-134). This consolatory self-assurance is in the context of the loss of the former vision: "What though the radiance which was once so bright / Be now forever taken from my sight" (L. 175-76). Repetition of various adjectives and epithets for the child augment the scheme and structure of the ode: the father of man, Child of Joy, the growing boy, Nature's Priest, Foster-child, Mighty Prophet! Seer blest! The eye among the blind, etc. Each expression brings out a new dimension of 'the child' and serves to hold and sustain the central theme.

Conclusion

The ode completes its structural circle through the pattern of celebration at the possession of insight, gradual loss of it – as traced under the heading 'Echoes' – and then recovered through mature "philosophical mind" (L. 185).

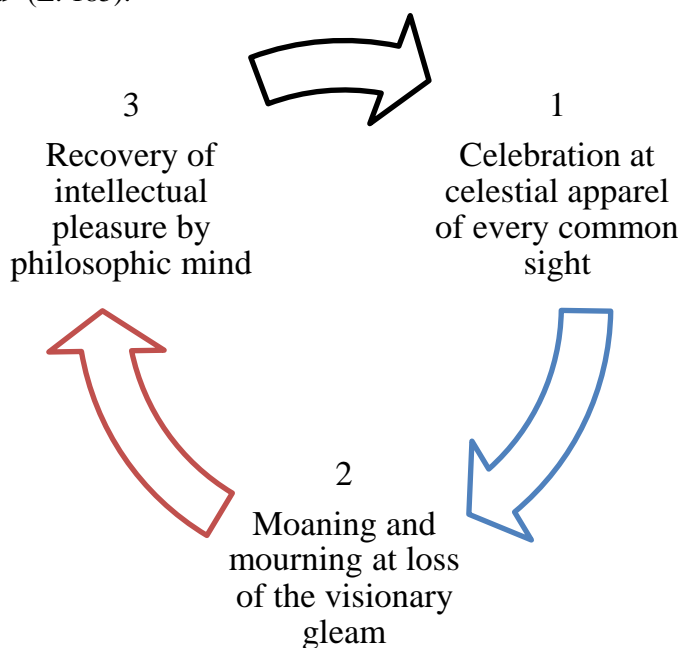


Figure 2: Structural Pattern of the Ode

In the first phase of the circle "every common sight" seemed "[a]ppareled in celestial light" with "freshness of a dream." The second phase revolves moaning and mourning at the question: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?" (L. 56). The process of recovery starts from stanza IX with the realization that something "doth live in our embers" (L. 129-30) and reaches its culmination when "the philosophic mind" (Stanza X, L. 186) announces with joy that

To me, the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears. (Stanza XI, L. 202-3)

Ode on Intimations is a mature specimen of the tradition of an ode. It is a long ode of eleven elaborate stanzas of varying complex structures. The ode maintains its sober and stately tone from beginning to end, communicating ceremonious formality and loftiness of thought of romantic subjectivity. It is a combination of public and private modes of the genre: it is private in its focus on the subjective approach to life and the public in its social implications. The poem is a representative reflective and meditative expression of Wordsworth's romantic subjectivity. The glorification of a

child is a highly personal metaphor of subjectivity. But, as Wordsworth claimed in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (2013), a poet is a man speaking to men but possesses greater sensibility, implying the social nature and temper of romantic poetry. Again, he purports to liberate his readers from the artificialities of the 18th-century poetry and sensitize them towards apparently the 'meanest creatures' of nature. This is a very sublime project that Wordsworth upholds in *Ode on Intimations*. Eagleton observes that in structuralism, elements of a structure in themselves do not make meaning possible; their relationship does so (1996, p.82). In *Ode on Intimations*, the images of the moon, the sun, and the babe separately do not carry Wordsworth's romantic brand of truth. It is the placement of these three images in a relational pattern that makes the transcendentalist interpretation of the symbols possible: intelligibility of the ode lies in fitting together of the images because they have relational meaning, not a substantial one.

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