

Realism in William Ernest Henley's Poems

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Introduction

In this world of struggles where only those who fit survive, it is always worth deducing the poems of writers that teach how to conquer life's turbulence with strength and determination. The vision of these poems would somehow give readers regardless of age, gender, race and religion an idea on how to go through tough difficulties in life if by chance they are put in the same predicament.

Beautiful struggles of people are depicted in the work of art called literature. As part of man's way of life, its theme is said to be universal in nature. This universality makes any literary piece, prose and poetry alike, interesting to read and to talk about as it mirrors the past, the present, and the future generation. Indeed, literature is written to reflect personal or vicarious experiences of people from all walks of life.

Poetry, being the highest form of literature, is not only the most elemental form of human communication but also the most sophisticated and subtle genre. Difficult and challenging due to the language used and its intricacy, poetry as a condensed work of art is rich of universal values that anyone who reads it has to put in his emotional overtones to a particular expression so that his conversation with the creator becomes a meaningful transaction. Thus, those poems that posit relentless determination amidst life's turbulence might be very interesting.

Interestingly the life of an influential British editor, critic, and poet of the late Eighteenth century, William Ernest Henley is worth knowing to present day readers. At the age of twelve, he was diagnosed to be infected of bone tuberculosis leading to the amputation of his left leg. This contagious disease brought him as an inmate at the age twenty-five at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary (www.victorianweb.org).

However, his illness did not stop him to make a difference in his life most importantly as a writer. It was then that he wrote a series of poems relating his hospital experiences and his will power to surmount the test of time. These poems teach strength of character-- a character worthy of emulation especially to problem-stricken individuals and natural catastrophe victims.

It is in line with this contention that the works of William Ernest Henley are chosen to be read, deduced and investigated in order to see how the formalistic elements carry out his intended meaning and how his own struggles reflect realities in life.

Methodology

Using the qualitative-descriptive discourse content analysis, this study investigates the formalistic figurative language and the mimetic signification of reality of the ten select poems of William Ernest Henley. It theorizes that Henley's poems reveal textual elements that are formalistic and mimetic in nature. An in-depth analysis on how he expresses his intended meaning in the language used to craft his work is given consideration. Using the two critical theories of analyzing literary works, namely: the formalistic and the mimetic, this investigation is conducted.

Formalism, being the first orientation, examines the relationship between form and meaning in a work highlighting the subtle complexity in the form of a text. In the

formalist view (Di Yanni 2000), its main concern is the work or the text itself as a distinct piece, free from its environment, era, and even its author. This is otherwise known as the theory of textuality or new criticism. It considers any literary work as an object with internal purpose (Adams 1971). This purpose is to communicate a sense of unity that conveys meaning. It generates its own unique form regardless of its own specific purpose.

Likewise, this orientation is also anchored on coherence theory which posits that formal structure governs meaning and demands understanding of the textual elements important. Just like fiction and drama, a poem has a story to tell through the unifying effect of its structural elements. Formalists pay attention to poetic vision, figurative language used and the implied audience known as the addressee in poetry. It does not place importance on things like the author's life or how the story could be understood as a representation of the specific time in history it was written. Only the work itself and how it is able to achieve meaning is important in this criticism. Hence, in the study of a poem, a careful analysis of the formalistic elements of versification is given importance. In this investigation, the vision as revealed by imagery, persona and addressee, and most importantly the figurative language used are the specific elements to be carefully analyzed.

Mimesis, being the second orientation, is the idea that art imitates reality, an idea that traces back to Aristotle who argued that the universal can be found in the concrete. The mimetic theory is the universal foundation of literature and of schools of literary criticism. This theory introduced into criticism that a poem is an imitation of life's struggles. In this critical analysis (Adams 1971), a poem is considered an imitation, a representation, or a copy of nature or some other poems. This presumption of imitation paves the idea of creation by the romantics.

Critics emphasized the power of language to create or at least give significant shape to nature; thus, making it and art go together as they are inseparable. This contention is supported by Wordsworth's definition of poetry (qtd. in Kennedy & Gioia) as the image of man and nature as he (2003) states:

“Producing immediate pleasure is not a degradation; of the poet's art rather it is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, the acknowledgment of the more sincere because it is not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love; further it is the homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure by which he knows, and feels and lives and moves.”

Thus, this paper aims to look into the reality copied in the poems. It shall delve into a careful analysis of the poems understudy to extract life's realities in the persona-vision- addressee transactions.

Result and Discussion

The figurative language that becomes elemental in drawing out Henley's poetic vision is embodied through the figures of speech used in his poem. These figures of speech show that Henley's poems though claimed to have departed from the traditional themes of Victorian poetry, and to have developed a morbid motif, still follow the

formalistic element of figurative language. After a thorough analysis of Henley's ten selected poems, the following figures of speech are used to help paint the concrete images:

Personification as defined is the figure of speech used when inanimate object is given the human attribute like in the lines of *Invictus*:

"Under the bludgeoning of chance; My head is bloody but unbowed..."

The persona in these lines is showing his defiance about his illness. The lines express his being steadfast and persevering of the battle of his life. This shows that the human attribute of defiance is given to the head.

Similarly, in the poem, *Some Starlit Garden Grey With Dew*, Henley points out how remorseful he was not having lived his married life well. This is illustrated in the lines which show that the human attributes of scolding and shouting are given to his past:

"Behind the past that scolds and jeers; For ungirt loins and lamps unlit;..."

Another personification is found in the poem, *Life is Bitter* as expressed in the lines:

"Fame's a pearl that hides beneath a sea of tears; Love must wither, or must live alone and weep."

This means that the human attributes of hiding and weeping are given to fame and love respectively. Moreover, metaphor is also used as fame is compared to a pearl.

Lastly, in the poem, *When You Wake Up in Your Crib*, Henley personified his feeling of dying in the lines that follow giving the human attribute of mastering and wooing a person to strangeness:

"Discouraging strangeness; Comes to and masters you; Takes you, and lovingly Woos you and soothes you Back..."

Next to personification is **simile** which shows comparison of two unlike things or objects using *like* or *as*. In the poem, *There's a Regret*, Henley tried to compare death to a lover who is so passionate to become victorious of the game called life as illustrated in the lines that follow:

"And writhing, fain; And like a triumphing lover, he shall take, his fill where no high memory lives; to make His obscene victory vain."

In this poem, he also compared his life to an old shoe that after getting soiled is easily thrown up as expressed in the lines:

"Like an old shoe; The sea spurns and the land abhors..."

This means that during his time he felt discriminated and despised by people; that for this reason, he describes the kind of life he lived as he suffered from the contagious disease-- tuberculosis.

Similarly, in the poem, *Invictus*, Henley immortalizes his dreadful experience as an inmate in Edinburgh Hospital as also illustrated in the use of **simile** in the first- two lines of the poem that state:

“Out of the night that covers me, Black as the Pit from Pole to pole...”

In these lines, he points out the comparison between his life and his horrifying illness.

Moreover, **simile** is also used in the poem, *Vigil*, where Henley illustrates that during his operation he was like placed in a kiln as he suffered from the pain that itched his whole being as specified in the lines:

“Ache and the mattress, Run into the boulders and hummocks; Glows like a kiln; While the bedclothes tumbling.”

In this poem, he also describes how patients took the pain in taking their medicines as if strangled from time to time in the comparison Henley uses as stated in the lines:

“The next man to me; Turn with a moan; and the snorer, The drug like a rope at his throat...”

Another comparison used in his poems is **metaphor**. It is the figure of speech that makes an indirect comparison of two unlike things or objects without the use of “like or as” as illustrated in the lines of the poem, *Vigil*, that state:

“Life is a practical nightmare- Hideous asleep or awake.”

This is a concrete example of an indirect comparison which means Henley being terrified of his illness considers life a nightmare. Of course for anyone who dreamt of a meaningful life ahead of him, it would be a disaster to suffer from a tubercular disease.

In like manner, the same comparison is used in the poem, *I am the Reaper* where he considers himself a catalyst of change not for others but for his own self. It shows that the life he lives after his diagnosis is solely dependent on the decision he made for himself in the past. Hence, he regards himself both the beginning and the end of any endeavor as expressed in the lines:

“I am the womb and the grave, The Now and the Ever.”

Another metaphorical expression used in the poem is in the last two lines of the poem, *Invictus*:

“I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.”

These lines make Henley well quoted as he shows his boldness against the pressing disease, tuberculosis. Moreover, he proves that his health condition was not and never did become a hindrance for him to make a difference on his life. He might be sick physically but he was mentally healthy and he used it exhaustively to live a meaningful life until his death.

Hyperbaton is another figure of speech used in Henley's poems. As defined, it is the figure of speech where the writer is given the poetic license not to follow the regular sentence pattern to suit his rhythmic scheme or his intended purpose. This is shown in the last stanza of the poem, *Invictus* that follow:

"It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

In order for scroll to rhyme with soul, it is placed last in the second line of stanza four. The regular sentence pattern should have been: *How the scroll is charged with punishments.*

In like manner, hyperbaton is also used in the poem, *I am the Reaper* so that *gather* in the first line will rhyme with *summer* as stated in the lines:

"Silent I gather; Pale roses touched with the spring; Tall corn in summer."

Hyperbole is also used in Henley's poems. It expresses exaggeration in making the impossible to appear seemingly possible in the minds of the reader. This is illustrated in the poem, *Life is Bitter* as expressed in the line:

"Fame's a pearl that hides beneath a sea of tears."

The exaggeration is shown in having a sea of tears when it is impossible to shed tears as big as a body of water. Hence, this exaggeration is also extended in the poem, *There's a Regret* as expressed in the lines:

"You lie, About the beach of time, 'til by and by Death, that derides you too—"

Similarly, hyperbole is also used in the poem, *Fresh From His Fastness* as expressed in the lines:

"Swarming voluminous, Weltering, wide wallowing, Till in a ruining; Chaos of energy, Hurlled in their quarry, They crash into foam!"

This illustrates that the persona being so fast in his accomplishments is like thrown up to a pit, empty-handed with the difficulties he encountered. The exaggeration is exemplified in the voluminous works that are just thrown up at an instance because of what he was going through in life.

Anadiplosis, as a figure of speech makes use of the same word(s) at the end of one clause or sentence at the beginning of the next, is also used mostly in Henley's poems repeating the titles in the first lines as shown in the poems:

"I am the Reaper"; "Some Starlit Garden Grey with Dew";

"Fresh From His Fastness"; "From the Break the Nightingale";

"When You Wake in Your Crib";

"It Came with the Threat of a Waning Moon" and "Life is Bitter".

Symbol is also used in Henley's poems. It is the thing or the object which represents something in his poems. This can be illustrated in the poem, *When You Wake In Your Crib* where the crib symbolizes the grave as expressed in the lines:

"Mother, O Mother!- God at His best to you, Out of the roaring, Impossible silences, Falls on and urges you, Mightily, tenderly, Forth, as you clutch at it, Forth to the infinite; Peace of the Grave."

Likewise, symbol is also found in the famous poem, *Invictus*, where Horror symbolizes death as expressed in the lines:

"Beyond this place of wrath and tears; Looms but the Horror of the shade..."

Synecdoche, a figure of speech that names the part to stand for the whole or the whole for the part, is used in Henley's poem, *Invictus*, where scroll stands for life as illustrated in the lines: *"It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll."*

Another figure of speech used in Henley's poem is **allusion**. It is an indirect reference to someone or something as illustrated in the lines of the poem, *Fresh From His Fastness*:

"Master of masters, O maker of heroes, Thunder the brave, Irresistible message-"

In these lines, the persona mentions the Divine Creator as if He is present to move anyone in struggle for life to continue living against all odds.

A figure of sound is also used in Henley's poems. **Assonance**, as defined, is the repetition of the vowel sounds in the lines of a poem. This is illustrated in the poem, *I am the Reaper* in the lines: *"Maker and breaker; Here and hereafter."*

Similarly, assonance is also used in the poem, *From the Break the Nightingale* as shown in stanzas 1 and 3 lines 6-8 and 2-4 respectively:

*"Fading even while she glows; Though he knows How it goes-";
"In the telling, though it shows- Who but knows How it goes!-"*

Likewise, this figure of sound is clearly used in the poem, *Vigil* as stated in the lines:

"Tumbling importunate, draft- Ramble and roll, and the gas,..."

All of these figures of speech and sound that represented the figurative language used are deemed important in drawing out the poetic visions of the select poems of William Ernest Henley.

On the other hand, through the persona- addressee transaction, the poetic vision is drawn out to signify life's realities in Henley's ten select poems. The poem, *Invictus* portrays Henley's difficult times from his diagnosis of tuberculosis at the age of twelve until his confinement at Edinburgh hospital at the age of 25. He must like buried 100 feet below the ground at that time but despite all these, he finds courage

amidst his health struggle and he expresses this in the last two (2) lines of stanza four (4) that state:

“I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.”

In today’s generation where suicide is common to problem- stricken individuals, strength of character -- the same character that Henley exhibits during the darkest point of his life, is needed. He, instead, of living a meaningless life from his diagnosis to his confinement and until his discharge from the hospital, opted to put value on his precious life by being of service to others, by being a catalyst of change on his own life and most importantly by being an epitome of strong will to others. If not of his determination, he would have died young and undignified. Hence, in order for a man to survive from the harsh realities of life, he must be a person with the right attitude to withstand the test of time.

Similarly in the poem, *I am the Reaper*, he shows so much optimism in life. The poem teaches the readers to welcome life’s failures because it is in failing that one learns something. What one sow is what one reaps. He illustrates it in these lines:

“I am the Sower. All the unbodied life; Runs through my seed-sheet.”

Another poem that shows Henley’s positive attitude towards life’s difficulties is the poem, *Some Starlit Garden Grey with Dew*. He articulates in this poem that just like any other marriages, he too had a stormy married life as affected by his past experience. He and his wife must be shaken but they surmount the test of time together. Thus, in life one must welcome problems as they are meant to teach valuable lessons as illustrated in the lines that follow:

“Arise! No more a living lie, And with me quicken and control; Some memory that shall magnify; The universal Soul.”

On the other hand, in the poem *Fresh From His Fastness*, he reveals his intimate relation with his Creator. He acknowledges his faith and gratitude as illustrated in the quoted lines:

*“Master of masters, O maker of heroes, Thunder the brave, Irresistible message-
“Life is worth Living; Through every grain of it. From the foundations; To the last edge; Of the cornerstone, death.”*

In like manner, in the poems *Double Ballad of Life and Death* and *When You Wake in Your Crib*, Henley teaches readers to consider death as the finish line of God’s human creation; that man should prepare because it comes at anytime the least one expects it to come as expressed in the lines:

“Let them whine, or threat, or wail! Till the touch of Circumstance; Down to darkness sink the scale, Fate’s a fiddler, Life’s a dance.”

Moreover, in the poem *From the Break the Nightingale*, he immortalizes his pain of losing her daughter. This teaches the reader to learn to accept the idea that it is in losing that one gains something. The gain might not be the same as the thing lost but

it could be more just like Henley who was devastated yet he was able to pick up his broken self and made the loss of his daughter an inspiration to live life according to the Divine plan as shown in the lines:

“Knows of last year’s Nightingale; Dead with last year’s Rose. Wise the enamoured Nightingale, Wise the well- beloved Rose! Love and life shall still prevail, Nor the silence at the close.”

Lastly, the poem, ***There’s a Regret***, teaches the readers the reality of discontent. Of course, nobody has the power to fathom God’s will for His creations; therefore, one must learn to accept what God has in stored for him.

With the foregoing discussions, it is found out that the poems of Henley teach strength of character-- a positive attribute needed to hurdle life’s frailties. ***In today’s generation where everyone could be vulnerable to problems and natural misfortunes, a determined and persistent personality would surely put one at a better edge.***

With these findings, it is concluded that William Ernest Henley’s poems reveal textual elements that are formalistic and mimetic in nature.

On the basis of the findings and conclusion, it is recommended that the figurative language of other poems across all ages be analyzed carefully to draw out their poetic vision and more didactic poems be written by creative writers.

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