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REVISTA DIGITAL
"INVESTIGACIÓN Y EDUCACIÓN"



ISSN 1696-7208

Revista número 13 de Diciembre de 2004

ESTUDIO LITERARIO DEL POEMA DE NAVIDAD "THE OXEN", ESCRITO POR THOMAS HARDY.

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Resumen: El poema de Navidad titulado "The Oxen" fue escrito por Thomas Hardy en 1915, y es uno de los poemas ingleses más populares que tratan sobre la Navidad. Este estudio literario pretende ser una herramienta de ayuda para su análisis e interpretación, así como para su incorporación a cualquier clase de inglés como segunda lengua.

THE OXEN

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
“Now they are all on their knees,”
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
“Come; see the oxen kneel,

“In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
our childhood used to know,”
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead; nor doth he sleep”
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!

This poem, written by Thomas Hary in 1915, seems to be presented as a Christmas tale, if we take into account the two explicit references to the temporal context of “Christmas Eve” (1-11) and the sentences in Direct Speech tol by “an elder” (3) may allude to the features of a tale addressed to some children. So it could be considered also a fable, with a moral for the children.

On the one hand, this poetical text represents a reminiscence of an adult in relation to some experiences lived during the implied narrator’s

childhood. This idea would be represented by the phenomenon of the analepsis existent in the Direct report sentences in lines 2 and 12, with which the implied narrator makes the reader believe that he remembers these words literally and that these moments represented an unforgettable experience of his life.

On the other hand, we could speak of the poem in terms of the mythic dimension, if we are able to explain the metaphoric relation of “the oxen” (12) that right from the title this word refers to the biblical texts and, more specifically, to the Nativity Scene or Crechè, where “the oxen” plays an important role. The action of “kneeling” (2, 8, 12) can symbolize the obedience.

Within the sonic component, the velar plosive /k/ is relevant and it appears just from the beginning in the word “oxen”. The labiodental fricative sound /f/ appears also repetitively and it balances the strongness of the velar plosive on line 1. The alternation on lines 11, 12, and 13 of the nasal consonants with again the velar plosive seem to reach the equilibrium. We would underline also the alliteration of the bilabial frictionless /w/ on line 9.

If we speak about the metric of the poem, we would have to analyse firstly the structure of the poem saying that it is composed of four quatrains which rhyme each one in an isolated way. We can comment also the irregularity of the lines, because it does not follow a fixed pattern. The

most regular strophe is the third one and the most irregular is the last quatrain. The pair lines maintain the regularity, while there are some lines with a free rhyme.

With regard to the rhythmic component, the Beats of all the lines mark the thematic structure and the linguistic environment of the poem. For example, the primary beat of the first line would be in “Christ (mas)”, placing the story in this temporal context.

Within the syntactic component, we firstly should comment three sentences in Direct Speech. The first one is placed before the reporting verb, by means of the device of Hyperbaton, on lines 2 and 3. Inside this general Hyperbaton we find another one in the sentence of line 2 where the adverb “now” is foregrounded at the beginning of the clause to emphasise the temporal situation. This is classified as a Representative Illocutionary Act. The second Direct Speech Sentence on line 12 would be a Directive Illocutionary Act, if we take into account the two imperative verbs “come” and “see”. The third one is the most complex one, structurally speaking, because it is the only one which takes two lines, and it also produces a Hyperbaton. This Expressive Illocutionary Act is justified by the appearance of several abstract nouns and adjectives, such as “lonely”, “barton” and “coomb”. The three sentences are in present Tense, contrasting with all the rest of the verbs which are in Past tense. Within the

narrated event in Past Tense, the Direct Speeches represent a flash-back of the implied narrator to a particular moment of his childhood.

Another syntactic device on this poem is the Hypotaxis. For instance on line 1, instead of saying “twelve o’clock”, it appears “twelve of the clock”. This is used to slow down the reading of the text or simply for metric purposes. There is also an alternation of simple sentences with complex ones, to provoke the equilibrium that the author seems to reach at the end. As it is typical in a poem, all the lexical words are full of content, but we could focus on the adjectives, which are a few, but very well used, because they give all the meaning to the noun they accompany: “hearthside ease”, “meek mild creatures”, “strawy pen”, and “lonely barton”.

Making reference to the pronouns, we can stand out the fact that the pronoun “we” is important, because it may simply be the so-called “editorial we”, but it can also refer to the implied narrator, and maybe to a friend of him who was with him at the moments he is telling to us. The pronoun “i” reflects the lyrical point of view of the poem and the subjectivity of it.

Within the semantic component we should consider firstly the principal semantic fields of the poem: that one related to Christmas time: “Christmas Eve” (1,11); the second one in relation to emotion: “ease” (4), “feel” (10), “lonely” and “coomb” (13); and the third one related to the livestock: “oxen” (12), “meek mild creatures” (5), and “kneel” (12).

We can adopt two positions about the content of the poem. On the one hand, we can agree with the superficial content without making hypothesis analysing the deep or metaphorical meaning of it. In this sense, it is a childhood reminiscence told by his main character who acts as the implied narrator of the story. On the other hand, it can be explained from several points of view, one of them could be the nostalgia he feels in the present moment related to a real event of his childhood where he was really happy.

Many authors have symbolised in their poems the recurrent theme of the nostalgia to the childhood, *the good moments have passed and they won't return*. We can related this with the philosophic idea of *tempus fugit*. As Jorge Manrique said, *how life passes, how life comes*.