

Original Paper

What is the Reaper Singing?

Spatial Writing of “The Solitary Reaper” and the Construction of Britain’s Identity

Guo Qian¹

¹ Jilin International Studies University, Jilin, China

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Abstract

This essay explores the song of the wheat-cutting woman in Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” through the lens of literary geography. Through the interpretation of the poem, it reveals the relationship between England and Scotland and historical reflection contained in it. Through the analysis of real space, imaginary space and dominant space, we explore how the song of the wheat-cutting girl in poetry can become the carrier of historical and cultural memory. Research shows that the geographical and cultural characteristics of Scotland are shown in delicate brushstrokes in the poem, and the complex historical relationship between England and Scotland is also conveyed secretly and deeply through the song of the wheat-cutting girl.

Keywords

literary geography, romanticism, Wordsworth

1. Introduction

1.1 Biography of William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was born in Cockermouth in the Lake District. His growing environment was deeply influenced by natural scenery. Wordsworth was educated at Cambridge University in his early years, and then traveled to France, during which period he was influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution. After returning to England, he focused on poetry writing and co-published *Lyric Ballads* with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, marking the embarking of British romanticism. His masterpiece *Overture* is a long poem based on autobiography, exploring the relationship between human beings and nature. In 1843, he was appointed as a British laureate poet, which had a profound influence on British literature.

1.2 The Development of Literary Geography and The Solitary Reaper

As an interdisciplinary discipline, human geography has gradually received wide attention. It integrates the research methods of literature and geography, takes humanistic phenomena as the main body, focuses on revealing the spatial structure of human activities and the regularity of their geographical distribution, and provides a new perspective for the interpretation of literary works. William Wordsworth, as an outstanding representative of British romantic poetry, advocated that poetry must have strong emotions and be written in ordinary and vivid language. His poetic style is natural and fresh, and the theme is mostly simple rural natural life. One of the outstanding features of his poetry lies in the full of emotion charged into the spot scene. His masterpiece “The Solitary Reaper” depicts a wheat-cutting woman working and singing alone in the field. The poet is deeply attracted by her song, but she can’t know exactly what she sings, and can only feel her emotions from the song. And the speculation about the content sung by the wheat-cutting girl has become the key to interpreting poetry. The author aims to study this poem from the perspective of human geography, which is conducive to the deep exploration of the spatial meaning, national emotion and historical connotation hidden in the poem. This study can not only deeply understand the artistic value of Wordsworth’s poetry, but also show how literary works reflect the complex emotional bonds and historical memories between regions and ethnic groups from the perspective of the relationship between England and Scotland and English and French history. The author will further reveal the deep cultural and historical structure behind poetry from the three dimensions of real space, imagination space and explicit space.

2. Wordsworth and Literary Geography

2.1 Exploring on Literary Geography in Wordsworth’s Works

William Wordsworth, a trailblazer of British Romantic poetry and a master of nature-inspired verse, holds a central place in the study of literary geography. He is famous for his profound understanding and description of nature. He advocates the use of everyday language for poetry writing, opposes over-carved poetry words and algae, and emphasizes that poetry is the natural expression of strong emotions, which has had a profound impact on the language style and emotional expression of modern poetry. Wordsworth once served as a Poet Laureate. The preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* is regarded as a declaration of British romanticism, while his long poem *Overture* is a masterpiece of autobiography and is regarded as an important work in the history of British literature. Wordsworth’s poetry and ideas left an enduring influence on subsequent generations, securing his prominent place in literary history. Wordsworth’s works widely reflect the profound perception of nature and geography, which forms the basis for his writing of literary geography. In his poetry, mountains, fields, and villages are never mere static backdrops for events. They mix with the very soul of characters like living entities, cradling memories and stirring emotions, while their natural grace and human warmth shape characters’

perceptions and thoughts—weaving their spiritual worlds into an inseparable bond with the places they dwell in. Take “The Solitary Reaper” as an example, the geographical elements in the poem are closely related to the emotions and national identity of the wheat girl, showing Wordsworth’s unique understanding of the relationship between geography and human beings.

2.2 The Geographical Elements in “The Solitary Reaper” and the Writing of the British National Identity

In “The Solitary Reaper”, geographical elements can be seen everywhere. Scotland’s natural landscapes such as fields, mountains and rivers have become an important part of poetry, and as the representative image of Scotland, her singing voice carries Scottish culture and emotions. From the perspective of the English, Scotland has a unique sense of strangeness in this poem, but also has a subtle connection with England through the song of the wheat-cutting woman. This interplay of connection and division reflects Wordsworth’s reflections on British national identity, highlighting the intricate ethnic and geographical ties between England and Scotland beneath the facade of a unified nation.

3. Poetry Interpretation: The Relationship between England and Scotland Reflected in the Song

3.1 Realistic Space

3.1.1 The geography and culture of Scotland

In William Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper”, the geographical environment of Scotland has a profound impact on the image of the reaper and the characteristics of her singing.

At the beginning the poet depicts that “Behold her, single in the field, Yon solitary Highland lass! Reaping and singing by herself” and thus the vast and undulating fields of Scotland come into view. The reaper is tiny in contrast to the vast fields. She works alone “Alone she cuts and binds the grain, And sings a melancholy strain”), and the openness of the fields not only highlights her loneliness but also sets off her perseverance. Her simplicity blends into the land, and the fields witness her diligence. The openness of the fields also allows her singing to spread freely, and the melancholy tune echoes in the fields, as if whispering to the wheat and telling the story of life.

“A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard In spring-time from the cuckoo-bird, Breaking the silence of the seas Among the farthest Hebrides”, the mountains of Scotland are crucial in shaping the image and singing of the reaper. The Hebrides Islands have a unique mountain-sea landscape with rolling mountains. When the reaper sings in the valley, the surrounding mountains act like a natural resonance box, making her originally simple singing rich and layered. The depth of the valley adds a mysterious flavor to the singing, lingering in people’s hearts.

The climate in Scotland is changeable. Although it is not directly described in the poem, it can be felt from the overall atmosphere. Under such a climate, people’s lives are full of uncertainties and hardships. The reaper’s singing naturally reveals her feelings about life “Perhaps the plaintive numbers

flow For old, unhappy, far-off things, And battles long ago: Or is it some more humble lay, Familiar matter of to-day? Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, That has been, and may be again?”. Her singing is a memory of past sufferings and a narration of the current difficult life, a true portrayal of the hard life under the unique climate of Scotland.

The geographical environment of Scotland shapes the image and singing characteristics of the reaper in many ways. Geographical elements such as fields, mountains, and climate are closely connected with the reaper, jointly composing this charming poem, allowing readers to deeply understand the profound influence of the geographical environment on literary creation.

3.1.2 Guess the Realistic Theme from the Song

The song of the wheat-cutting woman may contain a description of the native life in Scotland, such as the hardships of field labor, the joy of harvest or the attachment to the hometown. She may be singing the stories of the Scottish people passed down from generation to generation in this land, which are intertwined with the geography of Scotland and form part of the Scottish national memory. At the same time, it can be inferred from her lonely work that the song may also contain the loneliness and tenacity experienced by the Scottish people in the course of history, and the persistence in the face of external pressures, such as the influence of England.

3.2 *Imaginary Space*

3.2.1 Scottish Imagination from the Perspective of England

Scotland is often a mysterious and strange place in English view. In Wordsworth imagines, Scotland has become a space that triggers infinite reverie through the song of the wheat-cutting girl. This imagination may be influenced by England’s own culture and history, and contains established perceptions and misunderstandings of Scottish national character and cultural traditions. The English may regard Scotland as a backward area with ancient traditions, and the song of the wheat-cutting woman became the force to break this stereotype in this imagination, triggering the poet to think deeper about Scotland: The unique song of the wheat cutter carries the life, emotions, history and tradition of the Scottish people. Even in hard work, the song is still full of vitality, which makes the poet realize that Scottish culture is not backward, but has a fresh and unique charm, which is the expression of the spiritual world of the Scottish people.

3.2.2 Imaginary Elements and Integrated National Emotion in Poetry

In the imaginary space of poetry, the song of the wheat-cutting woman may transcend the boundaries of reality and integrate the emotional projection of the English people towards Scotland. This emotion includes not only the appreciation of the beauty of Scotland’s nature, but also the curiosity and confusion about the Scottish national identity. The solitary reaper portrayed in the poem serves as a symbol of the Scottish working class (Cui Dan, 2025, p. 85).

Wordsworth depicted the scene of her working in the field and singing alone, such as “She harvested alone and sang alone”, “Behold her, single in the field, Yon solitary Highland lass! Reaping and singing by herself”, and “she cut a bundle alone”, “Alone she cuts and binds the grain, And sings a melancholy strain”. This detailed description of the individual labor scene showed his concern for ordinary workers in Scotland. This implies that he believes that the working life of the Scottish people deserves to be seen and recorded, which reflects his respect and recognition for the people in this region of Scotland. By guessing the content of the song, the poet tries to build an emotional bridge between England and Scotland in his imagination. This bridge not only respects the uniqueness of Scotland, but also reflects the complex mentality of England in the process of national integration.

3.3 Explicit Space: The Reflection of Colonial and Ethnic Relation

3.3.1 Colonial-era England-Scotland Relations

Although Scotland and England share a political union, historical traces of England’s colonial dominance over Scotland remain evident. The ancestors of Scotland were the Celts, who were a widely distributed ethnic group in the ancient history of Europe. At first, the Celts were active in many places in Europe, but they clashed with the rising and expanding Rome, and once plundered the city of Rome. In the 1st century BC, Caesar conquered most of the Celtic tribes in Gaul, which made the place Romanized and formed a unique cultural landscape.

In 43 A.D., Claudius I invaded and conquered most of its southern areas. The northern Celts resisted by their terrain. In 122 A.D., the Great Wall of Hadrian divided the region to consolidate its rule. After the Western Roman Empire declined and gradually withdrew from the island of Britain (around the 5th century AD), the Anglo-Saxons from the European continent began to migrate into the southern part of Britain on a large scale. They gradually drove away and integrated the Celts who originally lived there by force, established many small kingdoms, formed the “Age of the Seven Kingdoms” and laid the foundation of England later, so the Anglo-Saxons played a key foundational role in the formation of the English nation. The Anglo-Saxons played a key foundational role in the formation of the English nation. “The history of the Anglo-Saxons’ invasion of Britain lasted for at least 150 years.” Starting from the end of the 8th century, the Vikings continued to invade the coastal area of the island of Britain, and later went deep inland, establishing ruling areas such as the “Danish Zone” in parts of England, which lasted for a long time. The Vikings communicated, integrated and intermarried with local Anglo-Saxons and other groups, which also integrated new elements into the bloodline and culture of the English. After the Norman conquest in 1066, the Normans from northern France entered England and ruled here. The Normans brought their own language (Norman French), culture, political system, etc., which reshaped the society, culture and other aspects of England, and further enriched the ethnic origin and cultural composition of the English. The Union Act of 1707 marked the official conclusion of England and Scotland as the United Kingdom of Great Britain, but behind it was a strong

combination of Scottish economic fragility and English political power. Scotland's land reform, the Puritan movement and the suppression of highland culture have all led to profound changes in local society and culture.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:

(Wordsworth, 1805)

3.3.2 Interpreting National Emotions under the Influence of Colonialism from the Song

The song of the wheat-cutting woman may contain rebellion against colonial history, although this rebellion is obscure. She may sing about the dignity and yearning for freedom of the Scottish nation. Even in the reality of being colonized, the Scottish people still maintain their own culture and national spirit. At the same time, singing may also reflect the cultural integration of England and Scotland in the process of colonization and being colonized. This blending is not only the erosion of Scotland by English culture, but also the influence of Scottish culture on English culture in difficulties. The two have formed a unique ethnic relationship in the complex historical process.

4. Discussion

Through the analysis of the content sung by the wheat-cutting woman in *The Lonely Wheat-cutting Woman* from the three perspectives of the reality, imagination and dominant space of literary geography, we can clearly see the complex and profound relationship between England and Scotland. This poem is not merely Wordsworth's portrayal of Scotland's natural and cultural landscape but also a deep meditation on the historical and national relations between England and Scotland. The song of the wheat-cutting girl has become the key to opening this complex historical and cultural treasure trove. It allows us to peek into the intertwining and collision of geography, ethnicity and history in poetry from literary works, further enriching our understanding of British literature and history.

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