Concept Of Immortality: Analysis Of Lord Byron's And William Wordsworth's Poems

Immortality is presented in both “Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull” by Lord Byron and “Intimations of Immorality” by William Wordsworth in different ways through the form, structure and language. “Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull” is a poem that is both obsessed with the significance of death in human life. In a way, Byron creates an afterlife for the skull-cup, “substituting” its “brains” with “wine”, but throughout the poem, the reader is aware that the skull-cup is not alive, even in the world of the poem. Intimations of Immorality is a long and rather complicated poem about Wordsworth's connection to nature and his struggle to understand humanity's failure to recognize the value of the natural world. The poem is elegiac in that it is about the regret of loss. Wordsworth is saddened by the fact that time has stripped away much of nature's glory, depriving him of the wild spontaneity he exhibited as a child.

Form And Structure

To begin with, the form and structure of each poem stresses in different ways the idea of immortality. “Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull” is composed of six four-line stanzas with an ABAB rhyme scheme, which gives a cyclical rhythm, as each stanza completes what it began. This creates a notion of entrapment and confinement, which stresses the idea of the inevitable death that comes as a natural consequence of the cycle of life. At the same time, this rhyme scheme offers to the poem a pervasive musicality which links well to the humoristic and grotesque tone of the poem. This again helps to stress the idea of immortality, which through the eyes of the poetic voice takes a very unique and alternative version – a scull used as a drinking cup. The indentation of every other line suggests a slightly unsettled energy, which is derived from the unsettling fact that the poetic voice is that of a dead person whose skull is used as a cup. On the other hand, “Intimations of Immortality” is written in eleven variable ode stanzas in iambic lines. It has variable rhyme schemes ranging from two to five stressed syllables. The rhymes occasionally alternate lines, occasionally fall in couplets, and occasionally occur within a single line to this poem. None of the stanzas follow exactly the same pattern, and the length of the lines varies. This asymmetry points to the messy thoughts of the poetic voice which come as random recollections of past memories that are closer to an earlier existence prior to human life. The title prepares the ground for these random and scattered recollections and this lack of consistency in terms of form and structure reflects visually the confused and highly emotional inner world of the poetic voice which finds it hard to remember clearly these past experiences.

Inevitability Of Death Which Stresses How Important It Is To Find A Way To Win Over Death And Gain Immportality

In terms of imagery, “Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull” is full of images that are slightly uncomfortable. For example, the skull asserts in a grotesque tone that “The worm hath fouler lips than thine” and then goes on to say that it is better to be used as a drinking cup rather “nurse the earth-worm’s slimy brood”. The repetition of the image of the worm together

with the reference to ‘reptiles’ later on, connotes the idea of decay which comes with death. This is important as the poetic voice wants to stress its own victory over this decay; the skull, though dead, has managed to avoid the process of decay and gain an alternative, almost humoristic, form of immortality. It is through remaining useful (as a drinking cup) whereby this dead man has managed to win over death. The same idea of decay is highlighted in the “Intimations of Immorality”, especially in the final stanza. The image of clouds around the ‘setting sun’ and the sober colours of this time of the day connote the notion of ageing and come in contrast with the “innocent brightness of a new-born Day” in the previous line. Wordsworth manipulates the structure of the stanza and divides it in two parts through an abnormally short line (line 200) which stands out in the middle and marks the passage from the new-born Day to the setting sun. This short line consists of three words ‘is lovely yet’ and a semi-colon, which raises expectations for something that will reverse the so far ‘lovely’ new-born Day. Here too, despite the fact that death remains inevitable, immortality can still be gained through an alternative attitude towards life. In fact, the poetic voice suggests that even though we lose awareness of the glory of nature in our adulthood, we should be glad that we experienced it once and can still remember it. The memory of this glory should be enough to feed us with strength and energy. In this last stanza, the narrator confirms that even though we lose the innocent childhood and other precious moments, we can still keep them forever in our memory and recollecting them can give us the solace and courage we need. Thus, despite the fact that the setting sun, the clouds, the sober colours and the man’s mortality have ominous and melancholic connotations, the poem ends with an implicitly optimistic tone in that the consciousness of one’s mortality and the wisdom this consciousness can give can generate thoughts too deep to cause tears. These are thoughts that generate positive emotions and mostly gratitude (‘thanks to the human hearth by which we live…fears’).

Importance Of Life On Earth Which Stresses Further The Need To Gain Immortality

Even though both poems are concerned with the idea of immortality, life itself still remains invaluable and loses nothing of its significance. In fact, in the ‘Lines inscribed upon a Cup Formed by a scull’, The fifth stanza introduces the “Carpe diem” concept. The lyrical voice urges to live intensely “Quaff while thou canst—another race” because when someone does that they might be rescued from “earth’s embrace” death to “rhyme and revel with the dead”. Basically, the lyrical voice prefers, once again, to escape being buried in order and have a different afterlife than lying under the earth thus being immortal The narrator says that nature is still the stem of everything in his life, bringing him insight, fuelling his memories and his belief that his soul is immortal. On the other hand, Wordsworth describes a kind of solemn, philosophical melancholy that comes from contemplating evanescence and loss. Flowers are classic symbols of transient beauty (they bloom, they wither). : Wordsworth’s closing lines (“Thoughts…lie”) suggest a complicated relationship between thought and feeling: The thoughts “lie too deep for tears”—suggesting perhaps a deep repression that does not permit emotional expression. Perhaps the thoughts lie—as in deceive–in the way they are “too deep.” But “the meanest flower that blows” the smallest flower that blooms, can give those thoughts that lie all too deep. It’s a somber close as we turn from the dawn of life (at the start of this poem) to the sunset with its “sober” clouds. In the final stanza, Wordsworth uses visual and aural imagery to explore his ideas. The power of nature is expressed through the personification of Fountains, Meadows, Hills and Groves in the first line of this stanza; these are invited to hear and they are written in capital initial letters as though they are human beings. Nature becomes powerful, as

the narrator addresses it directly in second person, as though he is addressing another man. Visual images like the brooks, the clouds, the setting sun, the flower that blows are additional manifestations of nature, which are also used as symbols of the themes that the poet wants to explore such as death, ageing, memory and innocence. Also there is an imagery of restraint as well, “I can see no more” “Shades of the prison house begin to close.” “Fade into the common light of day.” “Forget the glories he hath known.” “Then he will fit his tongue to dialogues of business.” “Haunted forever. “Be now forever taken from my sight.”. These images contrast with the light, power and freedom that connote to heaven and are linked more to imprisonment and darkness that reflect how man on earth is completely different from his original form. There is an antithesis of these images in the same stanza that emphasize the change from a pure child to a corrupted adult. There is also the use of anaphora, there is a repetition of “sing ye birds…as to the tabor’s sound.” This repeated verse links to the idea that the child is actually the father of the man. Adults repeat themselves to their children, instead of teaching themselves life’s pleasures through children. hence the joyous nature of the exclamatory phrases and lexical choices “bright” “play” “bound” “young”..

Alternative Forms Of Immortality

In “Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull” In the third stanza there is a lyrical voice that talks about the use he gives to the skull. For him it’s better to hold a “sparking grape” than to be buried dead (“Than nurse the earth-worm’s slimy brood” showing that the use of the skull after death connotes to immortality it is still valued and can be used after death and its better to use it as a drinking cup than to bury the skull, it can be used in afterlife for something positive like drinking alchoholic beverages. Death is not portrayed as sacred, but in a ugly way, as the dead body serves as food for earthworms. The lyrical voice questions the purpose of dead, and uses the skull to portray this nature as it is is described as something negative. The skull has “The drink of Gods” whereas the buried bodies are “reptiles’ food”. Thus, the imagery surrounding the skull contrasts greatly with that of the dead body. In the fourth stanza the lyrical voice speaks about aiding others after his death “Where once my wit, perchance, hath shone, In aid of others’ let me shine”). He is looking for a purpose after his possible and inevitable death. This inevitability is furthered by the images of the brains “And when, alas! our brains are gone”. Yet, the lyrical voice references the skull serving as a cup of wine “What nobler substitute than wine?” to find a purpose and a way of enduring after his own death. He is immortal by the idea of still having a purpose after his death existing in a way that aids others. On the other hand, in the final stanza of Wordsworth’s ‘Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ has a different way of feeling immortal through the memories of childhood. The ‘innocent brightness of a new-born Day’ points to the idea of a newborn baby and the brightness and innocence that it brings to the world. This is the reason of the narrator’s grief from the very first stanza - the loss of innocence and childhood which gave him access to the glorious part of the world. Although the narrator has lost his childhood, the power of memory in his heart still allows him feel the might of nature. This powerful memory is also the force behind the deep thoughts that are generated in his mind, which are ‘too deep’ to cause grief and tears. This is because the narrator is now in full consciousness of his mortality and is therefore in a position to appreciate, admire and enjoy even the most trivial things around him (‘the meanest flower’). Also there are some religious references. The skull informs us not to “deem my spirit fled”, that wine is “the drink of the gods” and that he has been “redeemed from… wasting clay” (a reference to Adam). Particularly with the double meaning of most of these religious references (“spirit” is both a non-physical part of a person and a class of

alcohol; the “wasting clay” is both the foundational element of man in Genesis and part of soil), Byron argues for an extreme atheism. There is also some use of archaic language The words “quaff”, “thou”, “perchance” and “alas” had all fallen out of common use by Byron’s time, though they were not so unfamiliar as they are now. In his use of archaic language, Byron creates the impression of a speaker out of touch with Byron’s modernity, as a speaking skull would be. The tone of the poem is consistently humorous from the imagery of a talking skull cup encouraging us to drink from it. In “Intimations of Immorality” there is an imagery of god and heaven.“Apparelled in celestial light.” “when the heavens are bare.” “Hath passed away a glory from the earth.”,“Nature’s priest.”,“Mighty prophet.” “Perpetual benediction”. These choose of words in these phrases remind us of Heaven where man originates, that contrasts with the corruption of society. These phrases also link nature with heaven, that shows the natural world to be a reminder of heaven in earth, and the immortal creations of God on mankind. The child is associated with this imagery because he retains the purity of a past life with God “our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting. Having said that, the poet uses words to describe the process of thinking and contemplation, such as “thoughts” and “tears”. Wordsworth manages to reconcile the emotions and questions he has explored throughout the poem. He realizes that even though he has lost his awareness of the glory of nature, he experienced it once and he can still remember it. The memory of this glory should be enough to feed him with strength and energy; now he decides that this is the case. In this last stanza, the narrator confirms that even though we lose the innocent childhood and other precious moments, we can still keep them forever in our memory and recollecting them can give us the solace and courage we need. Thus, despite the fact that the setting sun, the clouds, the sober colours and the man’s mortality have ominous and melancholic connotations, the poem ends with an implicitly optimistic tone in that the consciousness of one’s mortality and the wisdom this consciousness can give can generate thoughts too deep to cause tears. These are thoughts that generate positive emotions and mostly gratitude (‘thanks to the human hearth by which we live…fears’).

Context & Critics

.As seen in 'The world is too much with us,' Wordsworth believes that the loss stems from being too caught up in material possessions. As we grow up, we spend more and more time trying to figure out how to attain wealth, all the while becoming more and more distanced from nature. The poem is characterized by a strange sense of duality. Even though the world around the speaker is beautiful, peaceful, and serene, he is sad and angry because of what he (and humanity) has lost. Because nature is a kind of religion to Wordsworth, he knows that it is wrong to be depressed in nature's midst and pulls himself out of his depression for as long as he can. In the seventh stanza especially, Wordsworth examines the transitory state of childhood. He is pained to see a child's close proximity to nature being replaced by a foolish acting game in which the child pretends to be an adult before he actually is. Instead, Wordsworth wants the child to hold onto the glory of nature that only a person in the flush of youth can appreciate. Thus by staying young and appreciate the beauty of nature instead of hurrying to grow up you become immortal in a way and you never grow old thus not dying. Nature is linked to immortality since only children have the ability to admire it because they have more time in life.

Structurally, the poem carries forward a narrative. In the early stanzas of the poem, Wordsworth is lamenting the loss of spontaneous joy he feels towards nature, which he would have felt as a child. The poem then goes on to envisage the joyous nature of childhood, and Wordsworth

finally decides that his memories of youth help him to retain some of the divine sensations he once felt.