

A Poetic Re-Telling of the Orphic Myth: A Political Study of Denise Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus"

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Abstract

Modern poets, such as William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Rainer Maria Rilke, have used classical myths in a modern context to explain modern issues and to feed up from the rich material of Greek and Roman mythology. Denise Levertov takes the right of all authors to knock into the heart of Western and classical traditions and to reinvent them for her time. Though Levertov's early poetry expresses her appreciation of nature and of the epiphanic moments of daily life, during the late 1960s her work became progressively concerned with political and social issues. She conveys her offense in poems of distress over Vietnam and of commonality with the alternative culture that opposed the war. Levertov insists upon the connectedness of public and private spheres. The Vietnam War was a major preoccupation of the youth movement of the 1960s, whose protests against it caused the occasional disruption of Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus." This paper aims to retell the Greek myth of Orpheus and his famous song of perception and revitalization, which includes all the aspects of life and rebirth, with a modern revision. Levertov compares the awaking trees captivated by Orpheus's song along with the awakening of the revolutionary consciousness that lays at the heart of the countercultural movement of the 1960s.

Keywords: Denise levertov; A tree telling of Orpheus; Anti-war movements and orphic myth.



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1. Introduction

From the initiation of civilization, nations, kingdoms, and empires have shown a great ability to fight each other. Constantly, there have been those that have opposed the war to the point of incarceration and death. When the United States was a group of mutually dependent colonies struggling to gain self-determination, there were a great majority of anti-war activists that have been earnest and dedicated citizens. Paul (2018) The destiny of the Indians, the treatment of blacks, the prejudice against several ethnic groups, and the Civil War prove that Americans are not as innocent as they have sought to be. Inevitably, America has entered history and become self-aware looking retrograde as do falling powers (Joan, 1986).

As an anti-war activist, Denise Levertov uses her poetry to promote peace over military determinations. She raises her voice in opposition to the war, as a legitimate response against the morally damaged war against Vietnam during the 1960s. The poetry of Levertov grows from being a detached, contemplative lyric plugged with affluent recalls of landscapes and delighted revelation, to one devotedly associated with social and political demands of contemporary life: war, atomic power, and the prevalent human rights abuse. In the early 1960s, she began writing political poems echo an expanded and fortified dedication to political action. Humanism is the core of Levertov's vision, and the political nature of her writing marks the growing and evolution of an inherent empathic awareness. She argues:

I feel that it is poetry that led me into political action and not political action which has caused me to write poems more overtly engaged than those I used to write There is no abrupt separation between so-called political poetry and so-called private poetry in an artist, who is in both cases writing out of his out inner life (Kerry, 1986)

Levertov sets her anti-romantic attitudes to the service of peace movements and women's right, protesting against social and political prejudices. She advocates for all political poets imprisoned in many countries Rosemary and Canfield (2012) Levertov's development as a promised "poet in the world" follows her cumulative association in Leftist politics. Though she was an active member in Ban the Bomb revelations during the fifties, her poetry rarely reveals political convictions. She takes part in many anti-war protests and strongly supported objection organizations. The Vietnam war and the social chaos of the 1960s empowered Levertov to support the younger radicals, addressing political matters openly in poems and public readings (Lorrie, 1986).

2. Methodology

This paper is based on a systematic approach to rational analysis. Given the interactive cognitive approach, we examine the content analysis factor, historical analysis, and cultural analysis of content analysis, especially on theories and content.

3. Result and Discussion

The term “1960s” refers to a period known as the Sixties, signifying the complexity of organized cultural and political tendencies around the world. Due to the rebellion against the social constraints of the previous age through the excessive divergence from the norm, it becomes both the greatest of times and the foulest of times. In the early and mid-1960s, Western nations, such as the United States, France, United Kingdom, and West Germany, moved to the political left. As the war raised in the early 1960s opposition to it climbed. A movement to oppose American military intervention in Vietnam was strongly established in the United States. In 1965, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the New Left, led Americans in Washington in the first main protest against the war (George, 2005).

The protest movements lead to the national political development that contributes to President Richard M. Nixon’s decision to work toward a diplomatic determination to the war. Levertov and her husband, Mitchell Goodman, were major powers of the antiwar protest. The couple organized illegitimate protests that involved actions such as the devastation of draft cards, and the disreputable event for which other leaders were imprisoned. Levertov writes protest poetry, and reads it at rallies. During the Sixties, Levertov protests against atomic power policy through participation in rallies against certain aspects of United State foreign policy by becoming involved in the antiwar movements. Sara (2010) Ralph J. Mills, one of the earliest critics of Levertov, terms her work as “the poetry of the immediate.” The preoccupation with events of daily life in the early work may have made Levertov seems like the poet of the “Here and Now.”(Dorothy *et al.*, 1993)

Denise Levertov’s “A Tree Telling of Orpheus,” from *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), was written separately in 1968 at the peak of her involvement in the youth cultural revolution of the 1960s. She was enthusiastically protesting against the Vietnam War, speaking at rallies, and calling for revolution. Bradley A. Skeen argues that “it is easy to read ‘A Tree Telling of Orpheus’ within the context of the time.” As an early impression, “A Tree Telling of Orpheus” is a straight retelling of a Greek myth according to which the Thracian magician and mythic-poet, Orpheus, enchanting trees to make them walk. The poem is directly based on classical models such as the myth’s famous version in the tenth book of the Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The main topics of Orpheus’s song are war and human emotions. Levertov’s chief advance is to tell the story from the viewpoint of one of the trees, and to recounts the growth into the consciousness of a tree upon hearing the music of Orpheus’ lyre. (Constantakis)

The poem is told from the perception of a first-person narrator, using the pronoun “I”. It becomes obvious that the narrator is a tree from its depictions of other trees as its relatives and its own branches and stems. This literary device is called “anthropomorphism.” It refers to the treatment of an inanimate objects as if they are humans and give them the ability to understand and reason. In “A Tree Telling of Orpheus,” the tree that narrates the story has various human characteristics, being able to speak, sense, and even walk or dance. Indeed, the main subject of the poem is the tree’s gaining these very human attributes: (Constantakis)

White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began
I took it for a sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors
of salt, of treeless horizons. but the white fog
didn't stir; the leaved of my brothers remained outstretched,
unmoving.
Yet the rippling drew nearer — and then
my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if
fire had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips
were drying and curling.
Yet I was not afraid, only
deeply alert. (1-11)

“A Tree Telling of Orpheus” combines the most remarkable permutations of music, myth, and nature, where the power of music is indubitable. Levertov uses the image of a tree, as a symbol of life and energy, along with the mythological figure of Orpheus that has the ability to allure inanimate objects, including stones. Estera (2015) In her notes, Levertov refers to it: “it seems as if below the conscious level I have some rather persistent symbolism of trees as being, or wanting to be, or having once been, peripatetic, which in fact is alien and even somewhat repulsive to my conscious mind.” Denise (1973) The symbol of a tree is repeatedly used in the poetry of Levertov. The ascendancy of trees belongs to the first religious beliefs of humanity, which emphasized gods existence in trees. The Semitic ritual describes the tree of life called “Sefirot,” which probably goes back to Nordic beliefs, in which Odin was attached to a tree. The walking tree in “A Tree Telling of Orpheus” can be coordinated with manlike as well as godlike qualities, that serves as a metaphor of survival and renaissance. The tree signifies both life and creation, as well as birth and resurrection, the features given to the human being by God. According to the Nordic mythology, a man and a woman were created from trees, elm wood, and ash. Thus, it is not surprising when Levertov describes giving birth to her son in term of implanting a tree. Gancarz-Jurek All these assumptions prove that the metaphor of the awaking trees refers to the rebirth of the human mind during that time. The poem can also be considered as the poetic and spiritual deviations Levertov herself endured during the 1960s from Black Mountain lyrical “nature” poet to social radical, and antiwar activist. (James, 1988)

The Vietnam War is the key catalyst in politicizing Levertov’s poetry. Through its soaring violation of humanity, the Vietnam War provides an alluring appeal to action. Levertov’s political consciousness leaps from a merging of inner and outer experience that can be drawn back to her involvement in human rights movements. Driscoll Levertov speaks like a leader, conscious of her power and influence, rallying others to causes she promotes enthusiastically (Dargan).

In fact, Levertov's attack is directed against the pervasiveness of public collapse which ultimately aids the progress of the inhuman destructive forces by posing no resistance to them. Her devotion to life and love of peace and social justice are expressed in several poems. She challenges numerous categories of political violence and domination, along with injustice and discrimination in the modern world (Catherine (1989)). She believes that poetry serves as a "revolutionary stimulus, awaken[ing] us from our sloth" through the intense re-formation and experience of life's magnificence. "We must not go down into the pit we have dug ourselves by our inhumanity without some taste, however bitter, of that abundance." The poet's crucial charge is to renovate what Walt Whitman called "the path between reality and the soul." Driscoll Levertov's opposition of "unequivocal evil" in the world is concurrent with political involvement during the Vietnam war, and the explicit political issues in her poetry offer solid shape to her previous equivocal sense of social dissatisfaction (Smith). The political protest of the 1960s and 1970s, characterized by the pro-war rally, was directed towards policies of the government and the governmental institution, showing the love of country indifference to those whom they viewed America as a humiliating country (Katherine *et al.*, 1977).

In "Leda and the Swan," which is an example of Irish poetry based on Classical Greek mythology, Yeats writes a commentary on the political situation in Ireland. In Yeats's poem, Leda represents Ireland, violently disturbed by a foreign power, Great Britain. Such pure myth achieves a complete detachment from immediate political meaning. Cairns (2015) In Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," the mythical reverberation tells more than a Greek myth, and leads the speaker to seek an implied meaning. The distancing effects of myth can be used to manage the ordeal of a real war condition without reaching the self-defeating limits of abstraction and determinism. Remarkable symbolism can be found in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" consisting of a series of events where everything influences everything else to retells the history. The Vietnam War awakens the American youth to protest and to begin a revolution against inhuman violence. The poem is inspired by a meditation on the youth situation in relation to world politics. (Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 1975).

By the same creative miracle through which the song awakened consciousness in the tree, it recognizes the language and meaning of its words, and the meaning enters its existence as does wetness from dew. The first subject the tree notes is cosmogony, explanations of the various parts of the universe, and how they act and become. However, the transformative power of Orpheus's song throughout the poem calls the tree into consciousness from a more normal vegetative state. As the feeling intensifies, it seems to the tree as if it is burning, but the sensation paradoxically does not create any fear. The fact that the tree takes on increasingly anthropomorphic characteristics, creates a confusion between man and tree. The tree explains Orpheus' physical appearance in terms of a tree or another plant, comparing the human body to a tree trunk, the arms to branches, hair to grass, and so on. The tree realizes that it is with the lyre, as well as with his voice, Orpheus creates his music. Orpheus' music enchants everything, even animals, trees and rocks. The tree mentions that his voice makes a sound of its own, as opposed to the wind, which only speaks through the crunching of leaves. Currently, the tree no longer experiences the song as fire but seems to feel itself singing as much as Orpheus is, and the music is gently sloping up inside it: (Constantakis)

He carried a burden made of
 some cut branch bent while it was green,
 strands of a vine tight-stretched across it. From this,
 when he touched it, and from his voice
 which unlike the wind's voice had no need of our
 leaves and branches to complete its sound,
 came the ripple.
 But it was now no longer a ripple (he had come near and
 stopped in my first shadow) it was a wave that bathed me
 as if rain
 rose from below and around me
 instead of falling. (21- 32)

The subject of Orpheus's song revolves to fire. Though trees are naturally afraid of fire, the song provides them with self-knowledge and devours them to get the flower out of season. The tree pulls its roots out and begins to walk, following Orpheus as he leaves. Orpheus' ability to make trees walk with his song is the traditional miracle of the Orphic tradition that is the original inspiration on which Levertov constructs her poem. The trees on the woody hillside behind the narrator-tree also begin to walk, following Orpheus. It seems that the music gives them the command to walk, and their want to hear the music is unlimited that they follow Orpheus to listen to it. Consciously, the trees try to reply to Orpheus' music using the sounds made by shaking their leaves. The song of Orpheus has begun at dawn, and Orpheus continues to lead the trees on their journey throughout the day. Finally, Orpheus leads them to a grassy field, and as the trees form a circle around him they create a grove. The trees' dance packs Orpheus with the assortment of human emotion. At sunset, he changes his song so that it leads the trees to take roots in their new sites. Throughout the night, the music again dispenses over the trees like water. While the tree continues to hope for Orpheus' return, its life has been forever renovated by its hearing Orpheus's song: (Constantakis)

it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
 he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
 came into my roots
 out of the earth,
 into my bark

out of the air,
 into the pores of my greenest shoots
 gently as dew
 and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning.
 He told of journeys,
 of where sun and moon go while we stand in dark,
 of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day
 deeper than roots...(45-57)

Levertov indicates that her involvement in politics is the direct, natural result of a moral obligation. She reinforces the rhetoric of personal conviction with public action. It is impossible for her to deny the ugly fact of war's subsistence, though she herself is safe from the ravages of its destruction. Levertov succeeds in linking the gap between self and other, spirit and material substance, and internal and external experience. Levertov's work proves that "we are living our whole lives in a state of emergency which is unparalleled in all history" by frankly documenting her own struggle to react to incorporate and make sense of the external world. Regardless of the nature of her political views, Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is truly revolutionary poem. "Revolution or death," is Levertov's choice, which is highly personal, and she answers "Revolution, of course." "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" explores the inferences and complications of this choice. Smith for Levertov, poetry should come as naturally as the leaves to a tree, ascends out of necessity, and experiences from the exterior or inner world (Jewel Spears Brooker, 1998).

4. Conclusion

Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," is a documented testament about the youth idealism and the cruel war experience. Levertov believes in the individual's power to transform the self, and the movement's power to transform society, and the use of anthropomorphism creates a metaphor for the awakening of the youth consciousness through revolutionary guidance. Personification is Levertov's instrument for describing the youth's revolutionary power. Man parallels the tree that could be either dehydrated, lifeless or green and an emblem of charity and sacrifice. The tree's first perception of Orpheus's music is so gentle that it seems like a light breeze that brings them into life again. Like the Orphic song, the Vietnam War stimulates the consciousness of the counterculture youth and brings it into apprehension and political awareness. The protests of American anti-war activists have succeeded in turning public opinion against the war, forcing the government to reverse its course and begin withdrawing the American troops.

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