



The Descriptive Poetry “Smoke”

DARSHIL MAKWANA

Research Scholar,

Sentral University of Gujarat (CUG), Gandhinagar

1. Introduction

The preceding lesson introduced the fundamental concepts of poetry by talking about its numerous meanings, various forms, and brief history. Poetry's definitions miss out many times its components or what is many times known as elements of poetry. You might be surprised but forms about which we have already discussed in the last chapter is also one of the components or elements in the study of poetry. As we continue with present chapter, we'll talk about a few components and genres of poetry to round out the picture of poetry as a whole.

2. Components of poetry

Understanding the meanings in poetry is arduous task for anyone specially if does not understand how this intricate form incorporates sound pattern, poetic devices, images, figurative language, and many other substances. Following are the components that present unit takes up for the discussion.

- Rhyme and Rhythm:
- Form and Structure
- Figurative Language and Poetic Device
- Subject and Speaker

3. Objectives

1. Discuss descriptive poetry with special reference to the poem —Smoke
2. Critically Analyse —Smoke
3. Define and discuss descriptive poetry
4. Critically appreciate the poem —Smoke

4. Descriptive poetry

Descriptive poetry is a class of literature that belongs mainly to the 16th, 17th and 18th century Europe. From the earliest times, all the poetry which was not lyrical as far as the subject is concerned, would make use of beautification which can be termed as descriptive. But the critics of 17th century distinguished the ancients and the moderns on the basis of their representations. In descriptive poetry, the landscape, still life, architecture, nature and other such objects that the poet focuses on or uses are not a tool or accessory, instead they are the central idea or interest. In other words, when description is just an accessory or tool, and not the focus of the poem, that kind of poetry cannot be termed as descriptive poetry. James Thomson's *The Seasons* is a beautiful example of descriptive poetry. Here the landscape is of main interest. Similarly, Drayton's *Polyolion* is a descriptive poetry, where we can see the topographical movement through Britain. In other words, descriptive poetry is a poem which uses detailed words in order to create imagery of person, animal or inanimate object.

4.1 Introduction to the Poet

Henry David Thoreau born on July 12, 1817 at Concord, Massachusetts, US, was an American essayist, poet, philosopher, naturalist, and historian. Best known for his book *Walden* which is a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay "Civil Disobedience" (originally published as "Resistance to Civil Government"), Thoreau had keen interest in Western philosophy,

Transcendentalism, Poetry, Religion, Politics, and History. Henry David Thoreau was a complex man with many talents and he worked hard so that he can shape his craft as well as his life. He did not differentiate between his art and his life. His work is very rich at the same time it is full of the complex contradictions that he explored. And these contradictions and complexities make his readers keep reshaping his image to fit their own needs. His literary style involves close and minute observation of nature, personal experiences, pointed rhetoric, symbolic meanings, and historical lore. He displays a vivid poetic sensibility, philosophical austerity, and a keen attention to practical detail typical of an American. He spent his life creatively, creating meaning for himself and others. He believed in rethinking about life and always asked questions and looked at nature for more intense and meaningful existence. Thoreau's writings influenced many public figures. Political leaders and reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., William O. Douglas, and Leo Tolstoy, all were strongly affected by Thoreau's work, especially by Civil Disobedience. Moreover, Thoreau was influenced by Indian spiritual thought. One can find many obvious references to the sacred texts of India in his seminal work *Walden*. He also followed many Hindu customs. Thoreau contracted tuberculosis for the first time in 1835 and suffered from it intermittently afterwards. In 1860, following a late-night expedition to count the rings of tree stumps during a rainstorm, he became ill with bronchitis and his health declined, with brief periods of remission, and he eventually became bedridden. He died on May 6, 1862, at the age of 44.

4.2 The Poem: SMOKE

By Henry David Thoreau (1843)
Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird,
Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,
Lark without song, and messenger of dawn,
Circling above the hamlets as thy nest;
Or else, departing dream, and shadowy form
of midnight vision, gathering up thy skirts;
By night star-veiling, and by day
Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;
Go thru my incense upward from this hearth,
And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame.

4.3 Critical Analysis

4.3.1 Critical Appreciation

Smoke¹ was first published in *The Dial* in April 1843 along with another short poem *Haze*², under a general title of 'Orphics'. The title of the poem suggests the poet's fascination for the qualities of a basic element in nature, smoke. Smoke is a transitional form that hovers between solid and gas, an intercessor between earth and sky, earth and the Sun. It is obvious from the first reading that the perspective of the poem is that of the poet. The poem is written in one sentence and describes a pillar of smoke that rises from the hearth of the poet and ends in a command to the smoke to rise upward as the poet's incense and ask the gods to forgive his clear flame. The poem is written in free verse and does not follow any rhyme scheme. Imagery is the predominant tool that the poet uses here. The poem is divided into 3 parts as far the imagery of the poem is concerned. In lines 1-4 the image of journey of a bird is constructed. It shows the flight of the bird upwards. In the next 2 lines the bird image is developed further as the smoke rises like a bird and circles above its nest. In the second part of the poem the imagery changes from flight of a bird to a dark, shadowy undefined form, which is a contrast to the imagery of first 4 lines. Lines 9-10 make the final section of the poem. These lines are the command of the poet to the smoke that it should rise from the poet's hearth and convert into a message to God to pardon poet's clear flame. These lines are summation of the poem. In this poem, Thoreau is captivated by a very basic element of nature and that is smoke. Here we see Thoreau, the naturalist. In lines 1-4, where the image of an upward flight of a bird is created, the smoke becomes an Icarian bird³ as it ascends. Icarus is a defiant boy of the Greek legend who, disobeying his father, flew too close to

the sun, due to which his wax wings got melted and he drowned into the sea. Thoreau makes a skilful use of paradox here, as smoke though seems to be in a melted form in the heat of sun, just like that of Icarus, does not fall down but rises up. It continues its flight towards the heaven. In these 4 lines, Thoreau's knowledge and keen interest in the Greek mythology is visible. Further, in the next 2 lines, Thoreau, the naturalist, comes to fore. And the image of Icarus is converted to that of bird. Icarus is now Lark, who rises above in the fashion of a bird circling its nest. The smoke is compared to a lark without song. Thoreau compares smoke to the soaring flight of a lark because its flight is very high and long-sustained. Words like nest, song, lark, pinions, light-winged and Icarian bird reinforce the symbol of bird and it is merged with the image of journey through the words like upward flight, messenger, and circling. The words suggesting vague ideas like dream, shadowy, and vision are used in lines 5-8 to contrast with the concreteness of first four lines. The poet creates contrast of darkness and light with the help of words like midnight, night, darkening, blotting out and star, day, light, sun respectively. The contrast gets a combined expression in the word star-veiling. The concluding lines of the poem are the central thought of the poem, where the smoke is asked to rise up from the poet's hearth in the form of message to the gods asking them to pardon his clear flame. The expression clear flame is highly suggestive and can be a reference to poet's work, the essence of his writings, his individuality which is on the earth. With the help of these lines the poet attains the height of the poem, the highpoint that he intended to reach with the help of the imagery.

4.3.2 "Smoke" as a Descriptive Poem

A descriptive poem, as discussed above, is the one which uses detailed words to create an imagery of a person, animal or inanimate object and this imagery is the central interest of the poem. In the present poem, the inanimate element smoke is used as the central idea. The smoke which rises from the hearth of the poet travels upwards. Initially the image of Icarian bird is created by the poet. As discussed earlier, Icarus is the defiant boy of Greek legend, who disobeyed his father and went too close to the sun which resulted into melting of his wings and consequent drowning in the sea. Here Thoreau, who was well-versed with classical literature, uses the image of Icarus not only to show melting quality of smoke when it goes up but also suggests the defiance of smoke, that rises up in any condition. As the poem progresses the image of Icarian bird shifts to the image of a lark. Lark is a bird well-known for its high-soaring flights. Here we have a lark without song. Lark songs are audible even if the bird is at a great height, but as the bird is used as a symbol for the smoke, it is suggested that smoke attains great height like lark, but it does not have any song to sing or any sound for that matter. The image of the bird's journey is further strengthened by the use of words like circling, messenger and departing. It travels over the hamlets and rises above, towards its destination. The initiation of smoke's journey is definite but its travel is vague and hence in order to suggest this vagueness, the poet makes use of words like dream, shadowy and vision. In order to bring the combination of light and darkness which is so characteristically related to the greyness of smoke, the poet has used contrasting words like star, day, light, sun and midnight, night, darkening, blotting out respectively. The grey smoke also takes feminine form which is visible with the help of expressions like gathering up thy skirts and night star-veiling. The final lines suggest the command given to the smoke to rise from the poet's hearth and reach heaven to ask gods' forgiveness for the poet's clear flame. Here clear flame may suggest the artistry of the poet which is now devoid of any impurities but initially was an act of defiance as suggested in the first few lines of the poem. Other tool used for reinforcing the image of smoke is the creation of verticality. The lines of the poem suggest a vertical movement; they successfully create a picture of smoke, in different images, rising upwards. The use of present participles like melting, circling, departing, gathering, veiling, darkening and blotting give the poem a sense of interconnectedness and continuity, an image of movement. These words are used in the middle lines of the poem where the journey of smoke is described. The poem ends with the idea of smoke rising upward and the poet's flame on the earth. Smoke primarily deals with the object smoke and it uses different symbols and imageries to create a picture of the journey of smoke towards the sky. The poem does not metaphorically stand for anything other than the smoke. It is definitely open to various

interpretations on the basis of one's knowledge of Greek mythology, classical literature, nature and other related spheres, yet the focus of the poem does not change.

References

1. Gurudev, S. (2011). *American Literature: Studies on Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman*, Atlantic
2. Myerson, J. ed. (1995). *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, CUP.
3. Van, Doren M., *Henry David Thoreau: (2016). A Critical Study*, Wentworth Press.