

The Spinstress's nightingale

CriticalAnalysis

Original

Der Spinnerin Nachtlied

Es sang vor langen Jahren
Wohl auch die Nachtigall,
Das war wohl süßer Schall,
Da wir zusammen waren.

Ich sing' und kann nicht weinen,
Und spinne so allein
Den Faden klar und rein
So lang der Mond wird scheinen.

Als wir zusammen waren
Da sang die Nachtigall
Nun mahnet mich ihr Schall
Daß du von mir gefahren.

So oft der Mond mag scheinen,
Denk' ich wohl dein allein.
Mein Herz ist klar und rein,
Gott wolle uns vereinen.

Seit du von mir gefahren,
Singt stets die Nachtigall,
Ich denk' bei ihrem Schall,
Wie wir zusammen waren.

Gott wolle uns vereinen
Hier spinn' ich so allein,
Der Mond scheint klar und rein,
Ich sing' und möchte weinen.

Clemens Brentano, 1802

Original Version, German

Translation

The Spinstress's nightingale

It sang long years ago
No doubt the nightingale,
That was no doubt sweet sound,
Because we were together.

I sing and cannot cry,
And spin so alone
The yarn clear and pure
As long as the moon keeps shining.

When we were together
The nightingale sang
Now her sound warns me
That you have left me.

As much as the moon may shine,
I am thinking of only you.
My heart is clear and pure,
My god reunite us.

Since you have left me,
The nightingale sings,
I'm thinking by her sound,
How we were together.

May god reunite us
Here I'm spinning so alone,
The moon shines clear and pure,
I sing and want to cry.

Fabien Kunzler

English Translation

Analysis

Clemens Brentano composed the romantic poem “Der Spinnerin Nachtlied” in 1802.

The German poem came into existence just after the initiation of the French Revolution in 1789, during “a time of great revolutions” (Capistrano School, 2008: Romantic Period) concerning industrial upraise and social imposition. Reorientation in social stratum started to extend and life of the people was mainly focused on work, leaving hardly any space for leisure. The poets of the romantic period rejected this way of life. They strived to encounter their souls by expressing individual emotions; “the extremes of joy and sorrow, triumph and dejection, passion and despair” (Humanities Web, 2008: Early Romantic Period) as central motives of this time span.

The publishing date, the author’s background and typical motives found in the poem are all indicators of this poem being a romantic poem. The text is about a spinstress, who sings and regrets her long lost love under the moonlight, remembering and mourning over the past. The poem enhances the critique of the romantic poets’ negative response to the situation of people being a subject to industrial machinery. The lyricist Brentano emphasizes the miraculousness of the soul by trying to capture the woman’s desire, dream and ideal that she is seeking, but never seems to be able to fulfill. It is said that romantic poets possess the tendency towards everlastingness by accentuating the past and thus the never-ending longing. This can clearly be seen in the fact that the reader gets the impression of continuous sadness that will never turn to happiness again because the spinstress’ lover will never return.

In the romantic era the poets dissociated themselves from the rational way of life and way of thinking and devoted themselves to the deepness of human emotions, striving for an ideal of a longing, straying dreamer. Various signal words such as the moon, night, crying, loneliness and singing hint at the gloomy, melancholic undertone of the spinstress’ sadness and anxiety to be back with her beloved one again. Two emotional perspectives are used in the text. One perspective describes the current situation of her sitting alone in the dark and spinning and the other one describes the past of when she was united with her beloved. In the beginning when she thinks about the past her feelings

were of happiness and “sweetness”. In the third stanza they break apart and finally she realizes that her love has been torn apart leaving her with merely sorrow. In the beginning the reader feels a bit of hope, which by the end is completely destroyed. Throughout the entire poem the same melancholic words are repeated over and over again, for example “alone”, “crying” and “leaving” which continuously consolidates the reader of keeping the gloomy and doleful mood.

Concerning the form the poem consists of six stanzas with four lines each, making a total of twenty-four lines in the poem. The enclosed rhyme scheme follows an abba pattern in the first, third and fifth stanza and a cddc pattern in the second, fourth and sixth stanza. This means there are only four rhyme words ending with “-aren”, “-all”, “-einen” and “-ein”. Due to similarities in context, style and time tense the first, third and fifth stanza are one pair belonging together, describing the past time of being together, which is now over. The second, fourth and last stanza are the other part of the poem representing the present situation of loneliness.

The first and last lines of each stanza have seven syllables, whereas the second and third lines have six syllables. This adds an additional parallelism to the already existing enclosed rhyme scheme. The stanzas are linked by the fact that the last line in a stanza is picked up in the first line of the following stanza; yet this only applies for the group of stanzas belonging together. From one point of view the reader may contemplate these two parts as two separate poems that are now linked together.

In the first stanza the past love, which is symbolized by the nightingale, is described. The nightingale becomes a symbol of the fulfilled emotion. The words “vor langen Jahren” (“long years ago”) clarify that the time of fulfilled love lies back a long time.

The second stanza describes how the narrator is singing, yet cannot express her affliction in tears, which means there is no emotional processing going on because the spinnstress does not want to let go. The moon enhances the feeling of depression.

The third stanza refers to the first by stating how happiness can only return as soon as the nightingale (fulfilled love) starts to sing again, meaning a reuniting.

The fourth stanza is a continuation of the second and with the moon still shining, it reflects how the narrator will stay lonely and how her life is monotone. In her despair she prays to god, asking him to reunite her with her beloved one.

Relating to the first and third stanza, the fifth talks about the nightingale and how the spinstress always has to think about her lost partner when hearing its sound.

In the sixth stanza the prayer to god is still relevant, enhancing the loneliness due to the moon symbol. In the last line the narrator may be willing to let go since she is asking to be able to cry, which would be a sign of emotional processing.

After having portrayed the actual apparent content of the poem, I would like to decipher the meaning of the text and thus interpret it. To be able to understand the message behind the poem we have to firstly look at the time pan it was written in. As already stated above, the romantic lyrics approach an understanding of the world and human beings from a different angle, in a tumultuous, emotional kind of way. Romantic poems comprehend a variety of similar symbols and styles representing typical indications for the romantic era.

The symbols used in this poem are very close to nature. The 'nightingale' acts as a personified substitute for the fulfilled love of the past that brought happiness to the life of the spinstress. The 'spinning wheel' is a perfect example for a continuous circling movement - a never-ending process. In this context it represents the longing of the narrator. This longing can be projected into the woman's thoughts that seem to be circulating without finding a resort. The 'yarn' in the spinning wheel could represent the lifeline of the spinstress. As her yearning is infinite, her life will also be pure and clear, meaning boring and dreary. The symbol of the yarn later changes to the 'heart' and then finally the 'moon'. The moon signifies the situation of night, no love in sight, coldness and depression, which in the end is all that is left. As the romantics are not fond of rational thinking 'god' is used as a transcendent force – the only aid the spinstress can now turn to.

Various stylistic devices can be found in the poem. Alliterations in verse three (“süßer Schall“) and eighteen (“sing’ stets“) can be found. It is used in form of a consonance, putting emphasis on the expression. In line 3 the beautiful tone of the sound is accentuated and in line 18 the stress is put on the continuity, which again is a picture expressed throughout the poem. A range of elisions can be found throughout the poem, omitting one or more sounds in a line. This used on purpose, in order to maintain the correct number of syllables for the pattern in a verse, and not because the author wants to use slang language. Rather than just a symbol, the ‘nightingale’ is a metaphor because whenever the ‘beloved’ is addressed the nightingale is made use of. It can also be interpreted that the ‘nightingale’ represents a personification, yet due to the fact that the nightingale is already living creature, I personally prefer to agree upon a metaphor. The author uses many enjambments in the text (for example l. 1-2, l. 9-10, l. 11-12, etc.) breaking the syntactic unit between two verses. The repetitions used in the text are mostly referred to the symbols used a couple of times but a special form of repetition can be discovered in lines two, ten and eighteen, as well as six, fourteen and twenty-two. Each of the two verse groups end with the same phrase, which represents a rhetorical device called epistrophe. By the fact that the author does not merely repeat phrases but following an organized pattern, repeats the same complete phrases in each of the poem pairs, emphasizes the his intended expressions in an even more intense way. Although it is not a direct rhetorical device, a color contrast can be noticed in the poem. It is nighttime, which represents the color black. At the same time the moon, white color, is always present. The moon in a way unites these two colors and reflects the link between the two entities of the poem, past and the present.

The language used in the poem is very direct, simple and easy to understand. The author does not include any scientific or technical expressions. Due to the fact that he uses many symbols like the moon, god and heart the text seems fantastical, yet on the other hand he involves the industrial world by describing the spinstress’ work and actions. Again, this represents how the romantic poets are aiming at fleeing from daily life and trying to dive into this spiritual world of emotions. The language also underlines the dull and sad mood,

limiting the variety of words used and repeating the same structures and phrases throughout the poem. The verses are short which six to seven syllables each.

The rhythm used in the poem is an iambus. The verses start with a short syllable followed by a long syllable. This measure is commonly used in German poetry. To be exact, it is a tetrameter because in each verse exactly three syllables are stressed. For example:

x = unstressed
/ = stressed

x / x / x / x
Es sang vor langen Jahren
x / x / x /
Wohl auch die Nachtigall,
x / x / x /
Das war wohl süßer Schall,
x / x / x / x
Da wir zusammen waren.

After having examined the poem, analyzed the text and researched about the background I must say that the poem is a very good example of a lyrical text of the romantic era in the early 1800s. Next to his colleague Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano is one of the most famous representatives of the early Heidelberger romantic period (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2008).

The reason why I chose this poem is because we have talked about it briefly in German class and because I am interested in poetry. I have noticed that the romantic period does not necessarily talk about love, happiness and affection but was actually a form of assimilating a new and very difficult situation during the time of industrialization and social change. Romantic poetry is relatively easy to identify since typical symbols (as described in the analysis) are found in every text of that time and the motives of dullness, striving, longing and the fantastical are covered throughout many poems. The poem “Der Spinnerin Nachtlid” has given me a clear idea about what the romantic poets were aiming at and trying to express. Personally, when I read the poem I felt the sadness and dolefulness. The tone and mood is very well communicated in the structure and the language and even without analyzing it, just by reading it the first time, the reader ‘feels’

what the author intended to comprise in his words. At the end of the poem I wanted to know how it would continue, whether the spinstress would really never find true love again or whether there was more to the loss than a break-up – maybe a death? Her praying to god really illustrates her despair and this feeling affects the readers' emotions as well. Moreover, I liked the fact that the structure was organized with a well balanced distribution of syllables, rhymes and tones because I personally dislike disarranged poetry for some themes like love and grief.

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