

Studies on Wordsworth

Faria Saeed Khan

Department of English Literature
University of Balochistan
Pakistan.

Abstract

Wordsworth is one of the most complex poets of English Literature. He focused in his works on, 'incidents and situations of common life' and brought poetry back to nature. He wrote about common man- the beggars, the farmers and the workers. This led to mixed kind of reviews from his critics - some praised his work but the others criticized it. Some argued that he was a poet of nature- an escapist but the others considered him as a poet of Man. This research article will discuss and explore the views of Wordsworthian critics and scholars.

Keywords: Nature, Man

Introduction

Studies on Wordsworth show that he was the central literary figure and complex poet of his time. Although man has always been a part of Wordsworth's landscape, his love for man has always been questioned by the critics. They argue that his love for nature blinded him to the feelings of man or that he escaped from the realities of life and took refuge in the world of nature According to John Morley:

During all the tumult of the great war which for so many years bathed Europe in fire, through th new time, Wordsworth for half a century (1799-1850) dwelt sequestered in unbroken composure and steadfastness in his chosen home amid the mountains and lakes of his native region, working out his own ideal of the high office of the poet.

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But Purkis perceives Wordsworth's retirement to nature as a strategic withdrawal for the betterment of humanity and says:

'Wordsworth's retirement to the Lakes begins to look less like a retreat than a strategic withdrawal to ensure survival. Although he chose a contemplative life, he defined his occupation as 'activity in solitude for society.' The fair work of nature provided Wordsworth with a contrasting background which showed up more clearly 'what man has done to man.'.....Matthew Arnold, after Wordsworth's death, believed that he alone could heal human nature in the iron time...' (Purkis, 1986:52)2

Wordsworth claims that his poetry is :

.... to console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to teach the young and the gracious of every age, to see, to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous.' (Cited in Owen, 1974:111)3

Like Hardy, Wordsworth brings man into companionship with nature but does not make him look inferior, he gives him certain vastness and solemnity. De Quincy extols Wordsworth as a poet of sharp and keen sensibilities; a lover not just of nature but of mankind also he says:

How often must the human heart have felt the case, and yearned for an expression of the case, when there are sorrows which descend far below the region in which tears gather; and yet who has even given utterance to this feeling until Wordsworth came with his immortal lines:-Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears? This sentiment, and other that might be adduced (such as The child is father of the man'), have been passed into the popular heart....Magnificent, again, is

the sentiment, = and yet an echo to one which lurks amongst all hearts, in relation to the frailty of merely human schemes for working good, which so often droop and collapse through the unsteadiness of human energies-Foundations must be laid in heaven. But the greatest distinction of Wordsworth, and the pledge of his increasing popularity, is the extent of his sympathy with what is really permanent in human, and also the depth of his sympathy. (Quincey, 1968:42-43)4

Wordsworth thought that in urban society man is debased and dehumanized by oppression and other evils, and has turned utterly insensible to his surroundings- to the domestic and social affections, to the colours, forms, or smell of flowers, the singing and the motion of the birds and animals, the colour of the sky or the changing weather. Therefore, Wordsworth depicted the beauties of nature and humble humanity in his poetry. He probed into the essence of man, available in the minds and hearts of people, especially of those living in the company of nature. Wordsworth is criticized for paying too much attention to the ordinary incidents and situations of life and for depicting beggars, farmers and workers as subject of his poems. In a letter to John Wilson, Wordsworth writes:

'You begin what you say upon the Idiot Boy with this observation, that nothing is a fit subject for poetry which does not please. But here follows a question, Does not please whom?.....Some are disgusted with the very mention of the words pastoral poetry, sheep or shepherd, some cannot tolerate a poem with a ghost or any supernatural agency in it, others would shrink from an animated description of the pleasures of love.....some cannot bear to see delicate and refined feelings ascribed to men in low conditions of society, because their vanity and self-love tell them that these belong only to themselves and men like themselves in dress, station, and way of life: others are disgusted.....I return then to {the} question, please whom? or what? I answer, human nature, as it has been{and ever} will be. But where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, {from with}in; by stripping our hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves to{wards me}n who lead the simplest lives most according to nature men who {ha}ve never known false refinement, wayward and artificial desires, false criti{ci}sms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who, having known these {t}higs, have outgrown them.....' (Cited in Owen, 1974:105)5

Wordsworth defines human experiences and paints the external world in shades that varied according to every individual's power of imagination. Keats speaks high of Wordsworth's power of imagination and says:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest beings as yet shut upon me. The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think- We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of this thinking principle within us- we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there forever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man-of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression- whereby this Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd We are now in that state- We feel the 'burden of the Mystery.' To this Point was Wordsworth come...Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them- he is a Genius and superior to us....Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton-..... (Keats cited inMcMaster,1972:162-163)6

Wordsworth was aware of the fact that stronger domestic affections existed among men who live in country and not in crowded cities. In his poems like Michael and Brothers, he portrays characters who are fountain of affection because, unfortunately in his time, such people were disappearing from English society due to the progress of industrialization. In The Ruined Cottage he depicts the pain and suffering of Margaret, a woman who loses her husband to the army; her mental well being collapses, her children die, and her cottage is ruined. Wordsworth felt and understood the suffering of the lady and was, thus, able to compose a poem of a universal nature. Coleridge in **Biographia Literaria** writes:

.....a sympathy with man as man; the sympathy indeed of a contemplator, rather than a fellow-sufferer or co-mate but of a contemplator, from whose views no difference of rank conceal the sameness of the nature;.....Here the man and the poet lose and find themselves in each other, the one as glorified, the later as substantiated..... (Coleridge, 1968:19)7

Wordsworth's poetry depicts the realities and simplicities related to human life. He teaches his reader how great characters are formed ;how pain and sorrow may be transmuted into new strength; how mind may be fixed upon lofty purposes, how domestic bonds of love and affection generate genuine happiness in time of disappointment and how man can overcome petty ambitions. His world of nature is always connected with the presence of man. His characters are bereaved mothers, deserted females, mad women, beggars, convicts, old people and common man. He associates their life with the grandeur of nature and honor them as ideal human beings. William Hazlitt remarks about this aspect of William Wordsworth's poetry:

He sees nothing loftier than human hopes; nothing deeper than the human heart. This he probes, this he tempers with, this he poises, with all its incalculable weight of thought and feeling, in his hands; and at the same time calms the throbbing pulses of his own heart, by keeping his eye ever fixed on the face of nature. If he can make the life blood flow from the wounded breast, this is the living colouring with which he paints his verse: if he can assuage the pain or close up the wound with the balm of solitary musing, or the healing power of plants and herbs and 'skyey influence, 'this is the sole triumph of his art.....In a word, his poetry is founded on setting up an opposition between the natural and the artificial; between the spirit of humanity, and the spirit of fashion and of the world! (Hazlitt, 1967:252-253)8

In The Song at the Feast Brougham Castle Wordsworth says:

*Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;
His daily teachers had been woods and hills,
The silence that is in the starry skies,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.*

Wordsworth's poetry engaged, provoked and entertained the reader and, therefore, continues to hold an important place in the literary canon. His poetry received a good deal of criticism. Some critics perceived that humanity in Wordsworth's poetry as effaced by nature and his love for man as subordinate to his interest and feelings of nature. J.Robert Barth argue that

humanity....Wordsworth's depth of feeling for the natural world may at times have blinded him to the actual feelings of some of the human figures in his landscape. (Barth, 1991:160-165) 9

Sunil Sarker is of the view that throughout his poetry, Wordsworth wanted to teach mankind that inhumanity is not essence of his nature; it is something external to it. He wanted to teach men the value of humaneness, goodness and morality. The oppression, hatred, poverty and trafficking of human beings led him to think and conceive of an ideal society where he would see liberty, love, brotherhood, sympathy and piety. Sarker compares him with Terrence and says:

Indeed whatever belonged to human beings and whatever feelings human beings possessed were empathetically shared by Wordsworth; of course, he shared the most those feelings that belonged to the meek, the innocent, and the oppresses or the beguiled or befuddled. His heart always went to the miseries of human beings.....Wordsworth's humanitarian zeal, and particularly his sympathy for the underdogs and misfits of the society, showed themselves in relief mostly in his poems written between 1793 and 1798.....(Sarker:2001,334-335) 10

In his poetry Wordsworth depicted the socio-political issues of his time. The reader finds himself in a dark world of poverty, crime, torture, despair, and broken dreams. He was deeply affected by the internal and external politics. In his sonnets he expresses his nationalistic passion.

He thought deeply of national greatness and poured his heart boldly into the sonnets to raise the dignity of human life by stripping it of its pretensions. In one of his sonnets he hails his country in the following lines against the European States falling in bondage:

*Thou art free
My country! And 'tis joy enough and pride
For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass
Of England once again and hear and see,
With such a dear Companion at my side.*

Similarly in sonnet XV he contrasts the people of England with those of France. He praises England for producing hands that penned, tongues that uttered wisdom and moralists who knew how to act and comprehend but France has none:

*Perpetual emptiness unceasing change
No single volume paramount, no code,
No master spirit, no determined road;
But equally a want of books and men.*

After the failure of the French Revolution the disillusionment with his political beliefs was so intense that it led Wordsworth to a mental crisis. This made him re-evaluate his views about man and society. Dorothy led him back to the world of nature. Living among the beautiful forms of nature at Grasmere he sought for genuine happiness and well being of man. Oliver Elton is of the view:

'He does not mainly write, like Rousseau, to expose himself; nor, like Goethe, from an interest in his past as a pageant and from the intellectual need for self-expression; nor, like Byron, in order to ease his mind a while and to be noticed. He writes for the good of the world.....He is justified; he has written, in The Prelude and the pieces that cluster round it, poetry that disinfects life for us.' (Cited in Sarker,2001:331, 332)II

Wordsworth wanted to disinfect life through his verses, he wanted to clean the ugliness of human soul and restore its brightness by sweeping away the evils and the corruptions of a society. His ideal society is a pastoral society because he thought that men who live in the company of nature are more happier and more virtuous. Wordsworth believes that man's innate goodness develops in the pure company of nature. In such an environment men are stripped of all Utilitarian motives and their humanness is restored. They are purified of all the vain influences of the social world and their pure and permanent nature is revealed. Wordsworth thought that simple life in the lap of nature is the solution of man's worries.

Wordsworth was a lover of Nature but he was also a lover of Man. It was the French Revolution that made Wordsworth a poet of Man. Wordsworth lost his faith in the French Revolution as a political creed, but its effect remained intact on his mind. The Revolution humanised his soul and built him into a poet of Man. The singer of the beauties of Nature became the singer of the sublimity of human soul. In The Prelude Wordsworth clearly emerges as a poet who had experience of one of the most bloody moments in history- the Reign of Terror. Like any democratic spirited Englishman, at first he enthusiastically welcomed the French Revolution, and believed that it would amount to a 'new dawn' for humanity. But the repercussions of the revolution soon cooled down his revolutionary zeal and in the eyes of the radicals he came to be known as a traitor. But Wordsworth refuted such charges, in a **A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff**, he writes:

.... You say: ' I fly with terror and abhorrence even from the alter of Liberty, when I see it stained with the blood of the aged, of the innocent, of the defenceless sex, of the ministers of religion, and of the faithful adherents of a fallen monarch.' What! Have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty? Alas, the obstinacy and perversion of man is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and, in order to reign in peace, must establish herself by violence. She deplores such stern necessities, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation.....(Cited in Dickinson,216:1974))I2

In **The Prelude**, Wordsworth criticizes the absolute, tyrannical power of the French and the English elite classes and rallies against the destructive potentials of the modern economy which disturbed the equilibrium in the society and polluted the environment of the country. The Industrial Revolution affected man's conception of his relationship with man and nature. **The Prelude** sets in contrast the urban and the rustic societies. Wordsworth extols rustic life and praises the rustics' wisdom and kindness. The narrator brings a poor ill soldier to a cottage instead of an estate for help because unlike the rich, the poor man:

*He will not murmur should we break his rest;
And with a ready heart will give you food
And lodging for the night. (433-435)*

In the above lines Wordsworth criticizes the institutions of the British government. His interaction with the oppressed people inspired him for the creation of an egalitarian community based on equality and love. The ecologists argued that there is a close relationship between man and nature in Wordsworth's poetry. Bates pointed out that Romantic poetry is not only a means of expression but also a means of emotional communication between man and the world of nature. Bates discovers a bond between man and nature in Wordsworth's poetry. He points out that Wordsworth's poetry has strong historical force such as the destruction of England's green land due to the Industrial Revolution. The ecologists are of the view that Wordsworth's poetry is about man's place in the world of nature. They think that there is a green politics in Wordsworth's poetry.

Wordsworth's poems enlighten the reader about the sublimity of the soul. Unlike the ancient writers who narrated the stories of men in trouble, who were rescued by faith in a higher deity, Wordsworth, through his works, preached that man is fully capable of lifting himself from the ashes of his own destruction, and recreate his world with the help of compassion. He believed that revelation and inspiration come from within, and not just from without. Wordsworth believes in the companionship of the external and the internal nature. In **The Prelude** he writes:

*.....while the sweet breath of Heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A corresponding creative breeze
A vital breeze which travell'd gently on
O'er things which it had made, and is become
A tempest, a redundant energy
Vexing its own creation..... (Bk 1,34-38)*

Wordsworth probes deep into the working of human mind and believes that:

*man and the objects that surround him as acting and reacting
upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain
and pleasure; he considers man in his own nature and in his
ordinary life as contemplatinglooking upon this complex
scene of ideas and sensations, and finding everywhere objects
that immediately excite in him sympathies.....(Wordsworth, cited in Owen,1974:80)21*

In the above mentioned lines the influence of Issac Newton is documented by the Wordsworthian scholars. Lori Burton in his article **Wordsworth and the Reweaving of the Rainbow** writes:

*Newton's explanation of the phenomenon of tides linked the sea to the solar system, and Wordsworth scholar B. R. Schneider Jr. points out that "Wordsworth's poetry is haunted by the sun, moon and stars
..... <http://itech.fgcu.edu/&issues/vol1/issue1/wordsworth.htm> 22*

Wordsworth was a poet psychologist. He intuited the unconscious, and has demonstrated that the literary works could play a larger role than has been the case in examining and even expanding modern theories of the mind. His poetry treats extensively the development of human mind, it provides one of the best sources for considering the conjunction between recent scientific inquiry and poetic expression of the mind's functioning. Modern critics believe that his works have been examined by means of psychological insights, primarily Freudian, as Beth Lau in his article writes:

One writer who is unquestionably an appropriate candidate for interdisciplinary memory study is William Wordsworth, whose poetry is preoccupied with the role of memory in individual life. As Christopher Salvesen argues, the modern sense of the self in time, which gave new priority to memory as a foundation for individual identity, was "first given clear and powerful expression, and turned to poetry, by Wordsworth." One of Wordsworth's innovations, Salvesen notes, was to turn "remembered incident" into "poetic event."⁽³⁾ Even the briefest survey of Wordsworth's oeuvre will document the importance of memory for this writer. Many of his best-known poems, such as "**Tintern Abbey**" and the "**Intimations Ode**," directly explore the workings of memory as the speaker in each compares his present self to an earlier self and struggles to come to terms with what has been lost and what gained with the passage of time. Wordsworth famously characterized poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility," making clear that he believed memory to play an essential role in the creative process.⁽⁴⁾

In addition, in **The Prelude** Wordsworth redefines the epic for his era as the story of his own life, in which "spots of time" or core, emotionally charged memories form the climaxes of the work as well as its organizing principle. Several prominent memory researchers recognize *Wordsworth's relevance to their studies and quote from his poetry*.⁽⁵⁾ *Literary scholars, however, have neglected the work of these psychologists. Most psychological interpretations of Wordsworth have followed a Freudian model, applying concepts such as repression and screen memories to the poet's treatment of the past.*⁽⁶⁾ *Recent memory research has challenged many of Freud's notions and offers new and, I would suggest, more fitting theories for understanding the nature and function of memory in Wordsworth's poetry. Applying many of the new findings about memory's operation to a study of Wordsworth's poetry can open up fresh avenues of interpretation and clear up some misconceptions that have prevailed in Wordsworth criticism.*

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Dewey W.Hall in his article **Wordsworth and Emerson: Aurora Borealis and the Question of Influence write:**

..... in Wordsworth's mature poetry, particularly, **The Prelude**, Wordsworth asserts the primacy of the "mind of man" and exalts this over Nature. As a "prophet of Nature" (rather than prophet of God), Wordsworth exclaims in Book 14: "Instruct them [mankind] how the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells, above this frame of things / . . . In beauty exalted, as it is itself / Of quality and fabric more divine" (14: 448-454).<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2008/v/n50/018146ar.html> 35

Wordsworth thought that man can achieve perfection through interaction with the natural world. In book 12 Wordsworth says:

*I seem'd life's every-day appearance
Of a new world, a world, too, that was fit
To be transmitted and made visible
To others eye, as having for its base
That whence our dignity originates,
That which both gives it being and maintains
A balance, an ennobling interchange
Of action from within and from without,
The excellence, pure spirit, and best power
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees. (369-378)*

The Prelude shares with the reader, Wordsworth's idea of an ideal community; which is based on the interaction of Man and nature and Man with Man. In Helvellyn, Wordsworth acknowledges a :

.....*little Family of Men,
Twice twenty, with their Children and their Wives,
And here and there a Stranger interspers'd
It is a summer festival, a Fair,*

Wordsworth considers the interaction between man and nature as a paramount element in creating peace within oneself, and with mankind. Man, in Wordsworth's conception, is not to be seen apart from Nature. Scarcely a poem of his is solely concerned with nature-description. His poetry is expressive of the restorative, moral and spiritual influence of Nature on the mind and personality of Man. Nature, in some of his poems may dominate, but "the still sad music of humanity" is never ignored.

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