William Wordsworth's Celebration of Nature in English Literature and Romantic Poetry

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Indrajit Patra

PhD Research Scholar

Coochbehar Panchanan Barma University

Department of English

West Bengal

Orcid Id: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0494-487X

Abstract : William Wordsworth is considered the poet who made nature the central topic of English Romantic poetry. Wordsworth's celebration of nature is not merely decoration. It is a method of thinking about memory, moral development, imagination and the common life of ordinary people. This paper analyzes how Wordsworth represents nature in his major poems and prose, and what impact this representation had on English literature and Romantic poetry. Through the analysis of Lyrical Ballads, the Preface of 1800, Tintern Abbey, sonnets of 1802 to 1807 and The Prelude, as well as the critical literature by M. H. Abrams and the ecocriticism of Jonathan Bate, the paper argues that Wordsworth represents nature in four interconnected roles: as teacher, as healer through memory, as spiritual presence and as setting of common human life. The paper finds that Wordsworth's celebration of nature cannot be separated from his theory of poetry as feeling recollected in tranquillity, and that his later criticism added some doubts regarding the political and historical dimensions of his nature poetry without diminishing its importance.

Keywords: Wordsworth; nature; Romanticism; Lyrical Ballads; The Prelude; imagination; memory; ecocriticism

Introduction

The poetry of nature is not new to English literature, but Wordsworth's (1770-1850) use of this theme reached a new level of significance. Prior poets described landscapes or used them as symbols. Wordsworth made the relation between human mind and nature the object of poetry and claimed that experience of nature has power to shape character, to console sorrow and to reveal truths that can be obtained only by imagination. Collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Lyrical Ballads (1798) is generally recognized as the starting point of Romantic movement in English poetry.

Historical background explains the turn of Wordsworth towards nature. At the end of eighteenth century, the rise of industrialization and urbanization, the disturbance of French Revolution and the loss of trust in rationalist explanation of human life occurred. Wordsworth, growing up in Lake District and returning there in adult years, found nature in the countryside to be the source of stability. Nature in his poems is the place where a person could regain the sense of wholeness and dignity of ordinary lives of shepherds, farmers and children.

This paper aims to explore the meaning and structure of this celebration. Three questions are asked: in which roles does nature appear in Wordsworth's poetry? What is the relation between the celebration and Wordsworth's theory of poetry and view on imagination? What has been the influence of this celebration and what are the critical objections to it? The objective is to provide a united account connecting these topics which usually are treated separately.

Literature Review

The criticism of Wordsworth is numerous. Among early and influential studies the one by M. H. Abrams (1971) is noted. He stated that Romantic literature is a secularization of religious patterns, in which the idea of harmony between mind and nature replaces the older

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one of fall and redemption. According to this interpretation, Wordsworth's celebration of nature reflects the poet's conviction that mind and the world were made for each other and that imagination complements the world perceived by senses. Geoffrey Hartman (1964) provided a thorough analysis of the work of Wordsworth from 1787 till 1814 and emphasized the relation between nature and imagination, proving that during the poet's development he realized that imagination was not completely dependent on nature.

Among studies on The Prelude special attention is paid to the narrative of the growth of poet's mind. Herbert Lindenberger (1963) analyzed the structure of the poem and the connection between it and the theme of memory. Stephen Gill (1989) provided a biography that connects the poems with the life of Wordsworth, including his time in France, friendship with Coleridge and intimate relations with his sister Dorothy. These studies prove that the celebration of nature is inseparably linked with personal history.

The next direction in criticism starts with Jerome McGann (1983). According to the researcher, Romantic emphasis on nature and imagination is ideology that displaces historical and political concerns. The idea of the withdrawal to the contemplation of nature, as in Tintern Abbey, in this interpretation is the means to avoid the social realities of the period. The interpretation proposed by David Bromwich (1998) differs from McGann's. He explored how Wordsworth's poetry addressed the themes of loss and memory and how Wordsworth carries the past in the present. The discussion between the historical critique and study of imagination remains the most crucial part of Wordsworth's criticism.

Recent research has recovered the environmental interest of Wordsworth's poetry. Jonathan Bate (1991) created the term of Romantic ecology to designate the idea that Wordsworth's attention to the relation between humans and their natural environment anticipates the modern ecology. He proved that the poet's care for the Lake District and for the effects of change on rural life makes Wordsworth the father of environmental writings. Bate's interpretation is a correction to the historical critique since it shows the political and ethical concerns of the poet in the poems.

Wordsworth's own critical prose is of great importance. The Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800) says that poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity", and that the language of poetry should be close to the language of ordinary people. These statements become the basis for the following criticism. Coleridge's Biographia Literaria (1817) gives a response to them and shows the differences between the poets.

Current studies lack two aspects. They separate the topics of nature, memory and common life, and seldom connect them in a single interpretation. Also, although the ecocritical and historical readings of the poetry are generally presented as opposed, they may be related. This paper tries to establish this connection.

Research Methodology

The study is the qualitative literary analysis. The primary texts include the 1798 and 1800 editions of Lyrical Ballads, the Preface of 1800, Tintern Abbey, the sonnet "The world is too much with us", the lyric "I wandered lonely as a cloud" and The Prelude. They were chosen because they reflect the main periods and genres of Wordsworth's work, and because they contain the statements about nature. Analysis included close reading of the role of nature in each text, thematic comparison of texts and reference to the critical literature. Historical background was also considered. No quantitative data were collected.

Nature in Wordsworth's Poetry

The selected texts and their chronology are given in Table 1. Four roles of nature can be distinguished and summarized in Figure 3 and Table 2.

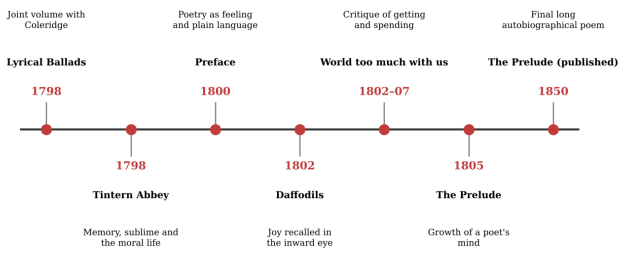
Table 1. Selected works and the treatment of nature

Work	Date	Role of nature	Central idea
Lyrical Ballads (with Coleridge)	1798	Setting of common life; source of feeling	Poetry from ordinary people and everyday experience
Tintern Abbey	1798	Healer and spiritual presence	Memory of nature sustains the moral life
The Tables Turned	1798	Teacher	Direct experience

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			teaches more than books
Preface to Lyrical Ballads	1800	Source of poetic emotion	Poetry as feeling recollected in tranquillity
I wandered lonely as a cloud	1807	Healer through memory	Joy recalled in the inward eye
The world is too much with us	1807	Lost source of meaning	Critique of materialism
The Prelude	1850	Teacher; formative influence	Growth of the poet's mind through nature

Figure 1. Chronology of the principal works discussed.



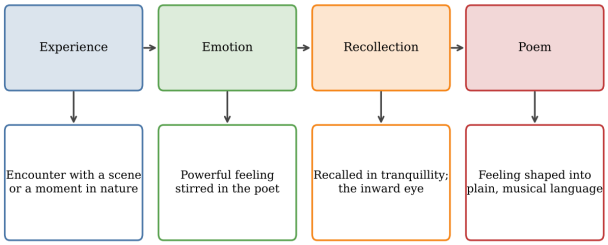
Nature as teacher

In "The Tables Turned" the speaker tells his friend to leave books and go into the woods: "One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can." These lines reflect Wordsworth's conviction that direct experience of nature possesses an educational power that is superior to the formal education. The same idea underlies The Prelude in which episodes of childhood like the stolen boat on the lake and skating on a winter evening illustrate the action of nature on the mind through fear and joy. The poet recalls that those experiences formed his moral and imaginative life, even when he did not understand it at that time.

Nature as healer and the work of memory

Second role is healing. In Tintern Abbey the poet returns after five years to the banks of the Wye and finds out that this scenery accompanied him during the interval, in "hours of weariness", giving him "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart." The memory of nature became the source of the calmness and moral strength for him. The theme is illustrated in a simpler manner in "I wandered lonely as a cloud", in which the memory of daffodils appears later when the poet lies on his couch, in "that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude." Nature is thus experienced in two ways, first in the encounter and then in memory, and the latter becomes the source of the poem. The sequence is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. From experience of nature to the poem, as described in the Preface and the lyrics.



Nature as spiritual presence

Third role is spiritual. In Tintern Abbey the poet speaks of the presence that disturbs him with "the joy of elevated thoughts", "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused", and finds it in the light of setting sun, ocean, air and man's mind. This passage is not the statement of any doctrine, and Wordsworth is very careful to say about what he feels. It illustrates the intuition of unity of mind and world that Abrams (1971) calls the central Romantic idea. Later in the poem the poet says that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her", the sentence summing up the poet's faith in the whole celebration.

Nature and common life

Fourth role links nature and the lives of ordinary people. In the Preface Wordsworth explains that he chose incidents of "low and rustic life" because in that state the passions of heart find better soil and speak a plainer language, and because the manners of rural people are influenced by their contacts with nature. The poems of Lyrical Ballads like "Michael" in 1800 edition and short poems on the old beggar and idiot boy give the dignity

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to the lives of rural and marginal people and prove that their feelings are as deserving of poetry as the feelings of kings. This is a democratic claim, and this is the sense in which the celebration of nature is also the celebration of human beings in their natural setting.

Figure 3. The four roles of nature in Wordsworth's poetry.

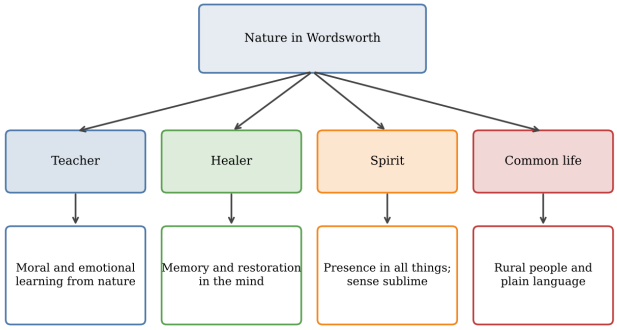


Table 2. Four roles of nature and their literary expression

Role	Key idea	Representative text	Typical device
Teacher	Experience educates beyond books	The Tables Turned; The Prelude	Address to a listener; narrative of childhood
Healer	Memory restores	Tintern Abbey; Daffodils	Return and recollection
Spiritual presence	Unity of mind and world	Tintern Abbey	Meditative blank verse
Setting of common life	Dignity of ordinary people	Lyrical Ballads; Michael	Plain language and narrative

Discussion

Four roles of nature are interconnected in Wordsworth's theory of the relation between senses and imagination. The Preface says that poetry originates from emotion recollected in tranquillity and this explains why memory plays such an important part in the nature poems. The experience of nature provides the emotion and work of recollection forms it into poetry. In The Prelude this process is applied to the poet's entire life, and nature becomes the setting of the formation of the mind.

The celebration of nature is the response to the circumstances of that time. In the sonnet beginning with "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers" Wordsworth criticizes the society absorbed by material profit and losing touch with the natural world. This sonnet proves that the celebration of nature is combined with the criticism of modern society and here the ecocritical interpretation by Bate (1991) finds confirmation. In the same manner, the dignity of rural people in Lyrical Ballads can be understood as a reaction to changes in the countryside.

Historical critique of McGann (1983) is a necessary clarification of this interpretation. Calmness of Tintern Abbey is achieved by the act of selection, and the poem has little to say about the social and political tensions of the period including the conflict caused by the French Revolution, that once stirred the poet's hopes. This is a fair remark that the contemplation of nature can serve as a withdrawal. However, the poems are not entirely silent on the matter. They mention the wars and the weariness of the world, and they present nature as the resource by which the poet faces them. Ecocritical and historical readings are therefore complementary and can be combined.

Wordsworth's celebration of nature had great influence on English literature. It formed the poetry of the second Romantic generation including Keats, Shelley and Byron, and the Victorian poets that inherited his vocabulary of nature and memory. It helped to create a tradition of nature writing in English prose and poetry continuing to the present days. Importance of Wordsworth's legacy in the present lies in the way that it gives the language of the value of the natural world in the era of environmental concerns.

Conclusion

Wordsworth's celebration of nature is a united view of human life and not a set of descriptions. Nature in his poems is the teacher, healer, bearer of spiritual presence and the setting of common life. These roles are united by his theory that poetry comes from powerful feeling recollected in tranquillity and by his belief in the mutual relation between mind and world. Criticism of his work from the historical critique to the ecocritical revival has qualified but has not diminished its importance. Wordsworth remains the important figure in English literature and Romantic poetry because he expressed the dependency of humans on the natural world, the theme that has increased in significance. Further study could compare his treatment of the topic with that of

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Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth and later nature writers.

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