

## Relevance of William Wordsworth's Poetry in Present Times

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### Abstract

William Wordsworth, the greatest nature poet of England, is regarded as the precursor of romanticism in England. He, in collaboration with S.T. Coleridge, Published 'Lyrical Ballads' in 1798. Wordsworth is considered as a great poet, philosopher, educationist and moralist. His nature poetry was romantic and eco-centric. The slogan of romantic poetry was 'Return to Nature'. William Wordsworth shares many views of the present day Ecocritics that aim at the protection and conservation of the environment. Today's world is characterized by the concerns of environmental pollution, materialistic culture, and degradation in moral values. William Wordsworth's poetry is an echo of morality, education, ideal culture and personality development through the concept of nature. He emerges not only as nature poet but as an environmentalist. His poetry focussed more on ecocentrism instead of anthropocentrism. Hence William Wordsworth's poetry provides solutions to many modern problems and evils generated due to industrialization, technological advancements and materialistic culture. The present paper is an attempt to study and analyse William Wordsworth's poetry in the light of the Ecocriticism, nature description, man and nature relationship, culture, education and moral teachings and hence to prove its relevance today.

**Key words:** Nature, Eco criticism, Romanticism, Anthropocentrism, Culture, Pollution, Environment

### Introduction

William Wordsworth was one of the most important romantic poets in English Literature. The romantic poetry was a kind of reaction of the eighteenth century age of enlightenment and industrial revolution and to the previous neo-classic poetry characterized by a tendency of the sublime use of language, refined poetic style, decorum, poetic diction, objectivity, rationalization of nature, dominance of reason or intellectuality and artificiality. It also emphasized neoclassic humanism i.e., art for humanity's sake. (Ref.1.) Again it reflected a tendency of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism holds that the human beings are opposed to and superior to nature and that the human interests and needs are of paramount importance. (Ref.2.) Romantic poetry was the free expression of the feelings of the artist. Wordsworth defined poetry as 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It takes its origins from the emotions recollected in tranquillity'. (Ref.7.) In romantic poetry, therefore, nature, strong feelings, simplicity, subjectivity and imagination found superiority over the city life, objectivity and artificiality. (Ref.6.) This poetry was ecocentric and emphasized on a symbiosis or true relationship between man and nature. (Ref.2.) Wordsworth devoted his whole life in discovering and feeling the living spirit, vitality, energy present in nature and transferring this in his poems. (Ref.10.) Eco criticism emerged as an important sub-branch of the literary and cultural studies in the late

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1980s and early 1990s. The Eco critics lay stress upon the centrality of nature or earth in literature and promote green readings. They seek to raise awareness about the need for concerns and constructive measures for the protection of natural environment. (Ref.2.) The British founder of Eco criticism is Jonathan Bate, who wrote 'Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environment Tradition.' While in U.S.A. major ecocritics were Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Ecocritics consider industrialization and the growth of technology as a barrier in the mutual interaction between human civilization and nature. Jonathan Bate says that "Poetry is the place where we save the earth". (Ref.4.) He also asserts that Romantics were the first ecologists due to their challenging and countering 'the ideology of capital' and originating a holistic vision of nature. (Ref.3.) Hence ecocritics look for romantic poetry in general and Wordsworth's poetry in particular for their ideologies. Romantic poetry was ecocentric. It held the supremacy of nature over man. Again it also revealed biocentrism which S. Campbell defines as the conviction that humans are neither better nor worse than other (Ref.5.) creatures, but simply equal to everything else in the natural world. Besides affinity to nature and its world, Wordsworth also had a plan for the growth of human mind and personality development through the agency of nature. He had moral teachings in his various poems that aimed at education and refined culture. Wordsworth highly honoured genuine natural feelings, innocence and a pure heart free from all kinds of vices. (Ref.13.) In the present paper, all these ideas will be discussed and developed with the help of the different examples from the various poems written by William Wordsworth.

### Discussion

William Wordsworth, the celebrated nature poet, wrote many beautiful nature lyrics. Most famous among them are: 'Tintern Abbey', 'Ode on the Intimations of the Immortality', 'Michael', 'Lucy poems', 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', 'The Solitary Reaper', 'The World is too Much with Us' and the epic poem, 'The Prelude'. Wordsworth took shelter in to the world of nature. He was fascinated by the external beauty of nature: flowers, plants, valleys, rivers, clouds, sunrise, sunset and every changing phenomena of nature. While describing the various physical aspects of nature, he enjoyed and felt pleasure in the company of nature. He regarded nature as a friend, companion, guide and even as a teacher and guardian and felt the presence of a universal soul in nature. Thus nature reflected God and God manifested himself through nature. (Ref.13.)

Here Wordsworth appeared as an ardent believer in pantheism. In 'Tintern Abbey' he writes:-

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with joy  
Of elevated thoughts a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwellings is the light of setting sun?  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels.  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.  
(Tintern Abbey, lines 96-105)

Warwick James Puts it about Wordsworth: "Wordsworth saw God in Nature and Nature in God."

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It is evident that he not only believed in pantheism but also spiritualized nature. (Ref.12.) Unlike P.B. Shelley, he believed in the law and impulse present in nature. Through a careful reading of William Wordsworth's poetry, it is obvious that he felt pleasure, peace and tranquility in the company of nature. It provided him with comfort, solace, contentment, tranquility, solitude and joy. (Ref.12.) In 'Tintern Abbey' again he says:

The sounding cataract.  
 Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colors and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, nor any interest  
 Unborrowed from the eye."  
 (Tintern Abbey, lines 78-85)

In spite of the tremendous materialistic progress, present day society suffers from many diseases like depression, sadness frustration, sorrow and grief at the heart. Problems of loneliness and alienation are increasing day by day as also the suicide rates. People have acquired much or accumulated more wealth today than the previous generations, but they are spiritually void. They feel no contentment and inner peace of mind. Therefore the above social problems have risen in multitudes. People do not love but hate each other. He says in 'Lines Written in Early Spring'

To her fair works did Nature link  
 The human soul that through me ran,  
 And much it grieved my heart to think  
 What man has made of man?  
 (Early Spring, lines 5-8)

Here, Wordsworth laments over the sorrowful condition as a result of the separation of man from nature which caused degradation in culture and moral values. Instead of love and kindness, hatred and jealousy are the commonplace feelings. William Wordsworth sought to nature because nature teaches to love and help each other and burn the harmful feelings in the heart. To see man and nature relationship is to love one's fellows and to participate in the 'joy in widest commonalty spread'. (Ref.6.)

Wordsworth's nature poetry teaches us to become best human beings. In the poem. 'Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower', he writes:-

"Myself will to my darling be  
 Both law and impulse; and with me,  
 The girl in rock and plain,  
 In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,  
 Shall feel an overseeing power  
 To kindle or restrain"  
 (Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower, lines 7-12)

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This poetry exhibits Wordsworth's philosophy and views on nature and the relationship between the mind of man and Nature. (Ref.10.) Nature is able to generate the humbler and tender feelings in the heart of the man. In the epic poem 'The Prelude' he says:-

“Ye winds and sounding cataracts!’ tis yours,  
Ye mountains! thine, O Nature ! Thous hast fed  
My lofty speculations; and in thee,  
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find,  
A never – failing principle of Joy  
And purest passion.”

(The Prelude, Book II lines 446-450)

It is evident from the above lines that nature provides with purest joy and can arouse purest passions. The world of nature is of peace, joy and virtue. This is the reason why nature is so important for the human beings and why Wordsworth worshipped it.

For this kind of joy and humble feelings, Wordsworth chose rustics as the main characters in his nature poetry and their simple language as the medium of communication, as against the poetic diction of the neo-classical poetry. Wordsworth had high opinions regarding the qualities of innocence, simplicity and humbleness as these are the genuine and natural qualities associated with rustics who lack vices, artificiality and falsehood in the heart. (Ref.7.) while living close to nature, these genuine qualities are promoted and men grow more virtuous. Distrust, hatred, jealousy, enmity and cruelty are major contemporary evils of today. To make the earth heaven and free from these evils we have to revive the nature poetry of Wordsworth where nature teaches humanity to think, speak and act in a right manner. Nature fills our hearts with joy and frees it from vices. It provides a kind of inner peace and solace essential for the mental, spiritual and physical health helping to build a healthy and ideal society.

In a poem 'The World is Too Much with Us' William Wordsworth clearly indicates that too much materialism, worldly pleasures and pursuits are not real happiness or aims of life. People's lives have become mechanic and monotonous. He laments the separation of man from nature. (Ref.12.) He writes:-

“The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts, a sordid boom!”

(The World is Too Much with us, lines 1-4)

The people of his age are not at all moved by the beautiful objects of nature. Nature alone can provide real happiness and peace of mind. Again he says:-

“This sea that bares her bosom to the moon,  
The wind that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not – Great God! I’d rather be

A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;

(The World is Too Much With Us, lines 5-10)

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To embrace nature, Wordsworth is ready even to become a Pagan and wants to be nurtured in the extinct creed. Here, he appears to be a believer in pantheism where he spiritualizes nature. He says that as a pagan he would have the opportunity to witness the sight of pagan gods like Proteus and Triton. Here the remarkable point is that, in India, Nature was worshipped from the ancient times and Indian mythology believed in pantheism and spiritualization of nature. In poems like 'Lucy Gray; 'Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower' and the epic poem 'The Prelude,' he described the role and function of nature as a guide, friend, teacher and guardian. Wordsworth had a plan of education where by education could be imparted by and in the surroundings of nature. Growth of mind and personality development can be achieved with the help of nature. As is clear from the discussions of many poems above that nature generates humble and noble feelings in the heart and helps in the growth of virtues which is possible when there is true communion between the mind of man and the universal soul present in Nature. (Ref.12.)

In the long epic poem 'The Prelude' Wordsworth narrated about himself how he grew in the company of nature and how many a time during his childhood and school days he felt the presence of a guardian spirit in nature. This concept of the appreciation of the beauty of nature and its spiritualization is very much significant and relevant today. As we know, today's main problem occurred as a result of industrialization, modernism and materialism is pollution.

The pollution is not only environmental but cultural also. Wordsworth's poetry is powerful here to deal with the problems of environmental pollution – air, land, water and noise pollutions. His poetry teaches to value nature- trees, flowers, birds, sea, rivers, oceans and all flora and fauna. We learn to grow more and more trees, to keep clean our surroundings, rivers, ponds, lakes and even oceans, to give importance to solitude and peace instead of noise, disturbance and hustle and bustle of city life. According to Green writing, Wordsworth is an early pioneer of 'human ecology'. (Ref.11.) when we spiritualize nature, we begin to respect it and as a result consider it wrong or sin to harm the natural environment.

Thus Wordsworth's poetry teaches us sufficiently and in a strong manner to save the environment of nature from being polluted. Concern for environment is today's major issue, but Wordsworth, the great nature poet, had understood the significance of nature and its environment two hundred years ago after he had begun to feel the harmful consequences of industrial revolution and the pursuit of materialism. Thus his poetry can be read in an ecocritical vein. Today ecocriticism has acquired important place in the field of literary and cultural studies after it had been made popular by such ecocritical thinkers and writers as Jonathan Bate, Cheryl Glotfelty, Harold Fromm and Lawrence Buell. Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. It studies the relationship between literature and physical environment and answers such questions as "How is nature represented in the sonnet? In what ways literacy itself affected human kind's relationship to the natural world? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping in to contemporary literature and popular culture etc? (Ref.8.) The concern of the ecocritics is not only the wellbeing of man but also the survival of human life by means of protecting the Natural environment. (Ref.8.) Ecocritics assert that nature, man and culture all share an essential kinship with one another.

Ecocritical studies are motivated by a sense of political urgency associated with the desire to investigate and remedy current environmental problems. (Ref.9.) They recommend the expansion of the 'green readings' – texts containing concern for nature and its environment. The ecocriticism shows a growing interest in the religions of the so called primitive cultures. They also take keen interest in the primitive religions like Hindu, Buddhist etc. that worshipped nature and spiritualized it. Wordsworth himself was affected by the pagan Nature deities of Greece and Rome. According to Mckusick, Wordsworth had a vital influence on and contributed to the fundamental ideas and core

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values of the modern environmental movement.” (Ref.11.)

Much influenced by the ideals of French revolution- liberty, equality and fraternity. Wordsworth placed them at a higher position and praised them everywhere in his poetry. He called the occasion of the French revolution as “Oh! Pleasant exercise of hope and joy.” Here he emerged as humanist. He sought to acquire these ideals in the midst of nature in a natural manner by teaching the internal human nature. He thought that when human nature or mind is taught virtues then only true communion with the external nature is possible. So he stressed both on the symbiotic relationship between man and nature and on morality or virtues. Then only man can have communion with God or feel the presence of universal soul or spirit in Nature through his deep love for nature. In a word nature must be spiritually discerned. (Ref.10.)

The problem of other type of pollution – cultural pollution can also be solved with the help of Wordsworth’s poetry. Cultural pollution means degradation and fall of moral values, due to which deformity and many evils and vices in society took birth. After the modernization and attraction to materialistic culture, many personal, family and social problems increased. This degradation in moral values is retrogression towards anarchy and self – destruction and is a great threatening to the existence of human life. It disturbed the relationship of love and affinity between man and man and between man and nature. Wordsworth’s message to humanity is of ‘plain living and high thinking’. His life, noble, sincere, ‘heroically happy’, never contradicted his message. All his life he was poor and lived in an atmosphere of plain living and high thinking. (Ref.10.) He wishes his readers to become:-

“Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;

True to the kindred points of Heaven and home:

(To The Skylark, lines 17-18)

Again he says about the education and moral teachings by nature:-

‘One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good

Than all the sages can.’

(The Tables Turned, lines 21-24)

Wordsworth believed in the ideals of French revolution-liberty, equality, and fraternity. He writes in ‘The Prelude’

We were brothers all

In honor as in one community,

Scholars and gentleman;

(The Prelude, Book IX, lines 228-230)

Here, he stressed upon these ideals and upon the feeling of ‘love’ for the liberation and emancipation of mankind. Wordsworth held high moral views and said that the secret of happiness in life is that one must do one’s duty under all circumstances. (Ref.12.) He preaches in ‘Ode to Duty’:-

‘Serene will be our days and bright,

And happy will our nature be,

When love is an unerring light,

And joy its own security.

(Ode to Duty, lines 17-20)

Thus Wordsworth laid stress on morality and taught love and duty and believed in liberty, equality

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and brotherhood. He preached to return to nature for peace, tranquillity, joy, solace, contentment and for moral lessons.

### Conclusion

It is evident that his poetry is a powerful instrument to cure the contemporary modern diseases broke out due to moral degradation and materialistic culture. It is powerful to solve the aggravating ecological crisis and environmental problems in the present era. Wordsworth is an early pioneer of 'human ecology'. It has plenty of moral teachings & lessons advocating moral values for the betterment and refinement of human culture and society.

It would be right to conclude in the words of William Wordsworth himself which he used when he once wrote to his friend Sir George Beaumont: - 'Every great poet is a teacher; I wish either to be considered as a teacher or as nothing'. (Ref.12.) He pointed out that his aim in writing poetry was '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, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous'. (Ref.12.)

His poetry lays stress on man and Nature relationship. It has concerns for the conservation and protection of natural environment emphasizing the need of the sustainable development. Hence his poetry is much relevant and significant today.

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