

An Analysis of William Wordsworth as a Romantic Poet

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Abstract: *William Wordsworth is considered as a major romantic poet. Romanticism was a reaction to the industrial revolution and the ideology of the age of enlightenment, especially the scientific rationalization of Nature. Romantic writers idealized nature, were often suspicious of industrialization and rationalism. Romanticism laid emphasis on emotion and individualism, subjectivity, simplicity in style, depiction of nature, imagination, rustics as subject-matter, supernatural elements and glorification of Middle Ages. William Wordsworth was a great nature poet. His poetry reflected many characteristics of romanticism. He laid emphasis on spontaneous emotion as a source of poetry. This research paper is an attempt to analyze William Wordsworth's poetry in the light of romanticism and to evaluate him as a great romantic poet.*

Keywords: *- Romanticism, Nature, emotion, imagination, subjectivity, solitude*

I. Introduction

William Wordsworth was born at Cocker Mouth in Cumberland located in the Lake District of England on April 7, 1770. From 1843 until his death in 1850, he was Poet Laureate. He began writing poetry as a young boy in grammar school, and before graduating from college he went on a walking tour of Europe, which deepened his love for nature and his sympathy for the common man. He came from a family of landowners, and from his earliest days he loved the simple country life and beauty of the region in which he lived. His life was peaceful and uneventful. He travelled to the continent and became interested in the French Revolution. He came back to England late in 1792, took a cottage in Dorset with his sister Dorothy and decided to devote his life to poetry. In 1790, amidst the French Revolution, he visited France. While in France, he became interested in the struggles and language of the common people. In 1795, he met poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They became friends and worked together to publish *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. This collection of poems, mostly by Wordsworth but with Coleridge contributing 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', is generally taken to mark the beginning of the Romantic Movement in English poetry. Both William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge invented a new style of poetry in which nature and the diction of the common man trumped formal, stylized language. Wordsworth is best known for 'The Prelude' which is a semi-autobiographical poem of his early years. Wordsworth famous works include "Lyrical Ballads" (1798), "The Excursion" (1814), "The Prelude" (1850). His best poems are "The Solitary Reaper", "Michael", "Tintern Abbey", "Daffodils", "Ode: Intimations of Immortality", "Lucy" poems, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge", "The World is Too Much With Us", "To Milton" etc.

Romanticism in English Literature

The Romantic Age in English literature began with the publication of "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798 and lasted up to 1832 or 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne of England. The chief subject of romantic literature was the essential nobleness of common men and the value of the individual. Liberty is fundamentally an ideal which was kept steadily before men's minds by a multitude of books and pamphlets as far apart as Burns "Poems" and Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man", all read eagerly by the common people, all proclaiming the dignity of common life, and all uttering the same passionate cry against every form of class or caste oppression. (Long, 369, 70) The ideals of French Revolution – Liberty, Equality and Fraternity inspired the romantic poets.

The poetry of Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley, John Keats and the prose of Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Charles Lamb and Thomas De Quincey reflected a new creative spirit and a patriotic enthusiasm which suggested the Elizabethan days. The essence of Romanticism was that literature must reflect all that is spontaneous and unaffected in nature and in man, and be free to follow its own fancy in its own way. The prevailing attitude during romantic period favored innovation over traditionalism in the materials, forms, and style of literature. Other innovations in the period were the exploitations by S.T. Coleridge, John Keats, and others of the realm of the supernatural and "of the far away and the long ago"; the assumption by William Blake, William Wordsworth, and P.B. Shelley of the persona of a poet-prophet who writes a visionary mode of poetry. (M.H. Abrams, 177) Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Wordsworth carefully qualified this radical doctrine by describing his poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility". The immediate act of a composition, if a poem is to be genuine, must be spontaneous that is, unforced, and free of what Wordsworth decried as the "artificial" rules and conventions of his neoclassic

predecessors. (M.H. Abrams 178) Regarding the spontaneity of poetry Keats wrote that “if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.” Romantics laid much emphasis on imagination and creative impulse. Poetry is a creative art. Imagination is essential for creativity. S.T. Coleridge stressed on imagination and regarded it necessary for poetic output. He substituted for the neoclassic “rules” the concept of the inherent organic laws of the poet’s imagination.

Nature plays a huge role in romantic literature. Romantic writers give personal, deep descriptions of nature and its wild and powerful qualities. Natural elements work as symbols for the writer’s emotions. Romantic writers celebrate solitude as they believed that creative inspiration came from solitary exploration. Many works of romantic literature are deeply personal, and they often explore the self of the writer. Subjectivity and autobiographical elements abound in the romantic poetry as romantics placed much emphasis on feelings and creativity which find source in the background and real-life surroundings of the writer. Romantics had a deep love for things distant in terms of time and place. So they took interest in ancient cultures and Middle Ages. Many works of romantics, especially of S.T. Coleridge, have supernatural elements. They find pleasure in distant lands, exotic locations, islands, mountains and oceans. Romantic writers believed in aesthetic beauty, not just of nature but of people as well. Keats was the worshipper of beauty. For him, “a thing of beauty is a joy forever”, and “beauty is truth, truth beauty”. Romantic poetry was much lyrical due to spontaneity. Many poems of P.B. Shelley and William Wordsworth are intensely lyrical.

Wordsworth as a Romantic Poet

Wordsworth was a great Nature poet. His poetry abounds in nature descriptions. His epic –poem “The Prelude,” has many nature descriptions- flowers, mountains, lakes, rivers etc. Wordsworth felt joy and solace in the company of nature. Wordsworth had a mystical approach to nature. He believed that it was not only the beauty of Nature that brought him joy and peace, but the life or Soul in nature. He could feel the Spirit in nature. “It was Wordsworth’s aim as a poet to seek beauty in meadow, woodland and the mountain top, and to interpret this beauty in spiritual terms”. (Arthur Compton- Rickett, 308). With Wordsworth, nature is both law and impulse. In poems like “Tintern Abbey” and “The Prelude”, Wordsworth had shown how his love of nature was developed and the various stages through which it passed. Wordsworth believed that there is a pre-existing harmony between the mind of man and Nature. (Mukherjee, 20,28). Below is an example of beautiful natural description by Wordsworth –

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair,
The sunshine is a glorious birth:
(Ode on Intimations of Immortality, lines 10-16)

Wordsworth spiritualized nature. In “Tintern Abbey,” he writes –
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 99-102)

Wordsworth had faith in the eternal Spirit pervading all objects of nature. He saw God in Nature and Nature in God. He was sorrowful when he realized that people of his age were indifferent to the beauty of nature and were busy amassing wealth. They were becoming more and more materialistic and remained far from spirituality and Nature. So Wordsworth wished to become a pagan and feel the beauty and the presence of Spirit or God in nature. He writes :-

It moves us not- Great God! I’d rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpse, that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea’
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.
(The World is Too Much With Us, lines 9-14)

Wordsworth believed that nature is the greatest teacher for mankind. He promoted this thought in his all works. In the poem "The Tables Turned", he says "Let Nature be your teacher". Again he says :

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)

His collection of poems 'Lyrical Ballads' in collaboration with S.T. Coleridge launched new romantic era and inspired a generation of poets to write romantic poetry. Wordsworth's poetry celebrated the individual and the subjective experience. He believed that each person had a unique perspective on the world and that this perspective was valuable in its own right. This emphasis on the individual was a departure from the enlightenment emphasis on universal truths and objective knowledge. His epic-poem 'The Prelude' is subjective and autobiographical in nature. It has been called the growth of a poet's mind. It is a record of the meaningful experiences of Wordsworth's life. In "The prelude," he has made a sincere effort to trace the growth and development of his inner powers. In the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." So he laid emphasis on feelings. All his poems reflect his genuine feelings towards the objects of nature, Nature itself and humanity. Further Wordsworth maintained that poetry "takes its origin from the emotion recollected in tranquility." Thus his poems were based on this conviction of the principle of emotion and spontaneity rather than on outward laws and decorum of the preceding neoclassical age. The following lines illustrate his power of imagination and the romantic love of distant lands –

No nightingale did ever chant
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian Sands;
(The Solitary Reaper, lines 09-16)

The theme of solitude is present in many nature poems such as 'The Prelude', 'Daffodils', 'The Solitary Reaper' etc. Note of melancholy, another characteristic of romantic poetry, is present in poems including "The Solitary Reaper," "The World is Too Much With Us" etc. Wordsworth was a poet of man also. The ideals of the French Revolution- liberty, equality and fraternity were in his very blood. The French Revolution taught Wordsworth that every human being was intrinsically great and capable of infinite development. In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth said "humble and rustic life was generally chosen because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, and are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language, because in that condition of life our elementary feeling co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently, may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated". Rousseau's theory of the essential dignity of the peasant is transformed in Wordsworth's poetry into an emphasis on the simplicity of the rustic. Wordsworth took for his heroes tramps, beggars, pedlars, wagoners and leech-gatherers. These rustics are always under the direct influence of nature.

His poetry often reflects a sense of nostalgia for a simpler, more innocent time. He often wrote about the rural life and the traditions of the past. This emphasis on history and simple life is another characteristic of Romanticism. Wordsworth used simple words and simple language to write poetry. Instead of poetic diction of the preceding century, his poetry reveals simplicity which he always advocated. Many poem like "We are Seven", "The Idiot Boy", "The Immortality Ode", "The Prelude Books I & II", "Lucy Gray" etc. celebrate child life and innocence. Wordsworth stressed on plain living and high thinking. Thus his poetry abound in all the main characteristics of romantic poetry and he is a leading romantic poet in true sense.

II. Conclusion

Romanticism in English literature began with the publication of the "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798. Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads in 1800 was a poetic manifesto or statement of revolutionary aims in which Wordsworth denounced the upper-class subjects and the poetic diction of the preceding neoclassical age and proposed to deal with materials from common life in a "selection of language really used by men." Romanticism is associated with creativity, imagination, feelings, spontaneity, an affinity for the past and distant, subjectivity and individuality, love for nature, mysticism and supernatural elements, aesthetic sense, and above all the simplicity of words, style and language. William Wordsworth's poetry reflected many of these characteristics of romantic poetry. Wordsworth's poetry advocated the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.

He is regarded as the greatest Nature poet in the world. From the above discussion, it is proved that William Wordsworth was a great romantic poet.

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