Wordsworth’s Concept of Nature: A ‘Balm to Weary Souls’

Faria Saeed Khan
Department of English University of Balochistan, Pakistan

Abstract: Declining morality was a point of grave concern for Wordsworth. He thought that Modern man has the potential for immense destruction but no corresponding moral standards to check that destruction. Wordsworth thought that life in an immoral society is extremely difficult. In such an environment Man’s survival is constantly under threat and human values are ridiculed. Wordsworth believes that moral values are essential in creating peace and harmony in any society.

Wordsworth sees nature as source of morality and a remedy for the sufferings of mankind.

I. Introduction

Wordsworth’s age was very much like our age. During his visit to the so called civilized world, the poet discovered that man has become indifferent to his surroundings. In the materialistic world, everything was bought and sold for money, even the spiritual values were converted into cash. Pursuit of wealth prevailed everywhere and man was completely ignorant of his spiritual side of existence. Wordsworth developed in himself a dislike for the atmosphere of indifference. He discovered that the trivialities of urban life can make man passive and weak.

Wordsworth’s ideal man is not passive and indifferent to his surroundings. He is social and devotes himself to serve society. Wordsworth wanted man to follow the ideas of friendship, fraternity and mutual service in life. He saw man as a deputy of God on earth. When striving for power the French revolutionaries trampled all the moral and the ethical values, Wordsworth disassociated himself from them. In his ideal community one man has respect for another. For Wordsworth humanism is based mainly on two principles; respect for man and realization of the position and place of man. Wordsworth raised the slogan of back to nature because nature taught him to look with feelings of fraternal lover ‘Upon those unassuming things, that hold /A silent station in this beauteous world’ (The Prelude) and also because:

She in the midst of all, preserved me still
A Poet, made me seek beneath that name
My office upon earth, and nowhere else,
And lastly, Nature’s Self, by human love
Assisted, through the weary labyrinth
Conducted me again to open day,
Revived the feeling of my earlier life,
Gave me that strength and knowledge full of peace,
Enlarged, and never more to be disturb’d
Which through the steps of our degeneracy,
All degradations of this age, hath still
Upheld me, and upholds me at this day
In the catastrophe....(Book 10,335-359)

Wordsworth saw a Divine Spirit in every object of nature and hoped that faith in the Divine spirit could reveal to man his own ideal nature.

Wordsworth is considered as a poet of nature. He sees nature as an inspiration- stepping stone to the understanding of life and realization of the power of human soul. The solutions he found for the problems of life came to him through nature. In The Prelude he says:

Here might I pause, and bend in reverence
To Nature, and the power of human minds,
To men as they are men within themselves.
How oft high service is performe’d within,
When all the external man is rude in shew,
Not like a temple rich with pomp and gold
But a mere mountain-Chapel such as shields
Its simple worshipper from sun and shower.
Wordsworth’s Concept Of Nature: A ‘Balm To Weary Souls’

Of these, said I, shall be my Song; of these,
If future years mature me for the task,
Will I record the praises, making Verse
Deal boldly with substantial things, in truth
And sanctity of passion, speak of these
That justice may be done, obeisance paid
Where it is due; thus haply shall I teach,
Inspire, through unadulterated ears
Pour raptures, tenderness, and hope, my theme
As found among the best of those who live
Not unexalted by religious hope,
Nor uninformed by books, good books though few,
Sorrow that is not sorrow, but delight,
And miserable love that is not pain
To hear of, for the glory that redounds
Therefore to human kind and what we are. (Book X11, 224-250)

In Advertisement to the first edition of The Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth informs the reader that the theme of his poems in The Lyrical Ballads are to be found in every subject which can interest human mind. ‘He encouraged the readers not to be held back by standard ideas of poetry but rather, to ‘ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human interest…’( Wordsworth, cited in Owen:65,1974) Wordsworth’s focused upon the ordinary and the simple and the primary feelings and emotions of the heart. He included the element of nature and natural landscape in his poetry for illuminating problems and sufferings of man and also as a source of nurture, pleasure, and spirituality of mankind.

After being in the world of troubles Wordsworth concludes that spiritual edification of man was not possible in the humdrum life of towns and cities; in the midst of nerve breaking sounds and anxieties, but by passing one’s time in place where the beauty of nature held out the cosmic view of the universe and provided solace and enlightenment to the soul. In nature’s company man can discover his essential humanity and his spiritual elevation by leading a life of simplicity, in constant communion with nature. Wordsworth’s poetry is poetry of self-analysis, of exploration and of consciousness. Wordsworth was inspired by a zeal to redeem man. He struggled against those forces of materialism that caused ugliness in human life. He was less concerned about attaining the metaphysical world and was more concerned about beautifying the concrete world. He realized that a lost Paradise can never be regained and its thought can only breed passivity. Wordsworth chose to depict in his poetry not the lost heavens but the beautiful world of future which was attainable by the moral elevation of man.

The era in which Wordsworth lived was an era of revolutions. In 1776, Americans declared their independence from England. In France the Fall of Bastille ushered in a series of bloody struggle for liberty, equality and freedom. Later, the Reign of Terror and its repercussions had a strong impact on the European community. Wordsworth saw the revolution as the coming of a golden age. But when it failed with the Reign of Terror Wordsworth shifts his hope from the transformation of the world through political means to a desire to reform the life of an individual and internalizes the revolution. He thought that an earthly paradise can be created but not through social or political means but through the interfusion of man and the nature.

In Wordsworth’s time, Britain was going through a period of social change. It forced man to a total re-assessment of himself as physical and moral being. It was a time of expansion and of experiment as well as of poverty, grim slums and exploiting of human resources. England became more and more urbanized due to her textile, coal, mining and iron industries. The Industrial revolution created deplorable living conditions in England. Overcrowding in the cities as a consequence of the population shift from rural to urban areas and the increase in the number of immigrants resulted in disease and hunger for thousands of the labouring class. It added to the misery of the masses and they were used as fodder of the industrial machine. One of the devastating effects was the division between the poor and the rich. With the advent of the power loom came unemployment. Excess of labour supply caused wages to drop. The factory owners and landlords were getting richer and they made every effort to raise their productions and reduce the wages of their employees. Whole families from the youngest to the oldest worked in the factories in order to survive. In the industrial centers like London, Manchester, the manufacturers used child labour extensively. Children were exploited by the employer. They extended working hours and paid low wages.

In Literature this period saw emergence of the Romantic Movement. The writers and the poets jotted down their responses to the chain of the events which the European society had been experiencing since the French Revolution. Intellectuals like Burke, Thomas Paine, William Godwin, Rousseau and many others influenced the works of the romantic writers and artists. They encouraged them and the common man to take a
Wordsworth’s Concept Of Nature: A ‘Balm To Weary Souls’

fresh look at himself as a social being and at nature as a source of inspiration. Rehder in Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry, writes:

…the poets between Milton and Wordsworth give the impression of not being able to free themselves….What happened after Shakespeare and after Donne is not a dissociation of sensibility, but a repression of feeling….it seems to be a primary characteristic of most of the poetry written between Paradise Lost (1674) and Lyrical Ballads(1798) …The poetry of Pope is the poetry of a static world….This is why the poems seem empty and hollow, or translated.

….The greatest change in English poetry after Shakespeare takes place with Wordsworth…. The degree to which feeling had been repressed is shown by the energy and detail with which poets after Wordsworth insist on telling us how they feel,…but at the same time, in different ways, to analyse it ….Their emphasis is on moods.

(Rehder:1971,40-42)2

The poets and the artists tried to break away from the traditions and the established customs; they experimented with their ideas and propagated intellectual and emotional freedom. In England the Romantic Movement emerged and developed in the hands of poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, etc. Shelley in Ode to the West Wind reveals his passion for the regeneration of mankind and rebirth of a new world order. He wants the West Wind to destroy the old order of things because the ‘heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed’ (Ode to the West Wind) mankind. He want the West Wind to use him as its lyre for preaching new ideas to humanity and create a new era of peace and happiness. Even Keats fails to escape the realities of the world where:

The weariness, the fever and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hair,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin and dies:
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

(Keats:1819,20)

The romanticist with their tendency to rise against authority were by nature radicals, reformers or revolutionaries. The romantic ideas existed even before the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. It is reflected in the works of Plato, Thomas More, Montaigne, William Shakespeare and Rousseau. All these writers focused their attention to the pursuit of a better world. Their vision of an ideal world served them as a measure against which they measured and judged the real world and tried to reform it. Plato’s Republic deals with the theme of search for justice. In his ideal State, life is directed by a highly moral conduct. The rulers are the guardians who conduct public affairs for the betterment of the nation. The idea behind the reference of an ideal State or a society is yearning for a kind of life which is free from the stresses of a utilitarian civilizations. Such compositions reflect dissatisfaction of the writer with the things as they are. The Renaissance scholars freed the European world from the darkness of the Middle Ages. They challenged the dogmas and valued the life in this world as an opportunity and an obligation. They propagated the worth of the individual and the dignity of man. In Utopia, More criticizes the harsh justice prevailing in his time. He maintains that crime is a result of the
Wordsworth’s Concept Of Nature: A ‘Balm To Weary Souls’

perverted social order. Instead of punishing crime, the state should correct the societal abuses which cause it. More’s **Utopia** is founded on a more truly Christian life, free of all corruptions and inequities current in his society. Similarly in Shakespeare’s romantic comedies the escape from the city into the world of nature shows a contrast between the ways of court and a simpler and happier life of the shepherds. In **As You Like It**, Amiens sings in the forest of Arden:

Under the green wood tree  
Who loves to lie with me  
And turn his merry note  
Unto the sweet bird’s throat,  
Come hither, come hither  
Here shall he see  
No enemy but winter and rough weather.

In **The Tempest**, Gonzalo outlines his scheme for a new and a better society:

```
Had I plantation of this isle, my lord,-

No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty;

All things in common nature should produce,
Without sweat or endeav'ring: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife; but nature should bring forth
Of its own kind all poison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.
```

During the Renaissance period the figure of the noble savage was held up as a reproach to European civilization. Montaigne in one of his essays describes the Tupinamba people of Brazil who eat the bodies of their dead enemies as a matter of honour. He considered Europeans more barbarous because they burnt each other alive for disagreeing about religion. The idea of an Ideal Society or a Brave New World does not suggest the literature of escape rather it calls for simplification of personal and social living. Alexander Pope in **Essay on Man** portrays an American Indian who is less civilized than his counterpart Europeans but he is more content and morally strong. He says:

```
Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor’d mind
Sees God in clouds, or hear him in the wind;
His soul proud science never taught to stray
Far as the solar walk or milky way;
Yet simple Nature to his hope has giv’n,
Behind the cloud-topp’d hill, a humbler heav’n;
Some safer world in depth of woods embrac’d,
Some happier island in the wat’ry waste,
Where slaves once more their native land behold,
No fiends torment, no Christian thirst for gold!
To contents his natural desire;
He asks no angel’s wing, no seraph’s fire:
But things, admitted to that equal sky,
His faithful dog shall bear him company.
```

Jean Jacques Rousseau insisted that man has a potential for goodness but civilization has corrupted him. He believed in humanity’s innate goodness. In **Emile** he begins Emile’s education not in the smoke and din of Paris but among the pure sights and sounds of the country. He advocated an appeal to the simple dictates of nature in politics, religion, education, and living in general. He blamed whatever misery man usually suffers on an overabundance of culture and complexity of civilization.

Wordsworth, as a reaction to corruptions of the European society, declares that a rustic man is his ideal man. He elect to deal with the lives of cottagers and rustics who lived in close proximity to nature in their country surroundings, as a subject of his poetry, rather than the politicians and statesmen intoxicated with glory and power. For Wordsworth nature suggests relationship and interaction between human mind and the world of nature and the spirit that rolls in all objects of nature. For Wordsworth God exists in Nature. He secularizes God and perceives Him in all objects of nature. Nature is no more a landscape, it means life which is in organically interwoven. It helps man to awaken his powers that lie within him such as his power of imagination. This
imagination helps him not in escaping the world but in immersing in it and then lead to the truth. or the Eternal Presence. Man is part of this Spirit of Nature.

Wordsworth lived in London for few months, ‘in a lonely room, and, mid the din/ Of towns and cities’ combating the ‘sneers of selfish men’ and the dreary intercourse of daily life.’( Tintern Abbey) Wordsworth emphasized that the farther man traveled from nature, the more degraded he became. In the company of nature ‘the essential passions of heart’ are purified and ‘they find a better soil in which they can attain maturity.’ He argues that urbanization has blunted the mind’s ‘discriminating powers’ and ‘reduced it to a state of almost savage torpor.’ In his sonnet The World Is Too Much With Us, Wordsworth laments, ‘Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers’ and give ‘our hearts away.’ The progress of the industrialization generated vanity and corruption in the upper class. Thus Wordsworth’s poems extol rustic life and not the city, because in rural environment men’s passions are ‘incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature.’ (Preface to The Lyrical Ballads) Wordsworth emphasized the moral side of his rustic characters and derived lessons of morality and wisdom from them. He is a poet who by ennobling rustic man preaches that all men are brothers; that same heart beats in the palaces and the hamlets hidden in the hills. Wordsworth made his rustic characters mouthpiece of humanity. He focused not on those factors that differentiate men and women but on those primal qualities of humanity where man and nature touch and blend.

Wordsworth employees nature in his poems as a remedy to a diseased world and shows how nature heals, nurtures and restores the soul from the enervating effects of industrialism and materialism. For Wordsworth nature is not just a beautiful scene but something far deeper. It has inner life of her own and man is part of it. He expresses a strong sense of relationship with the world of nature. This idea emerged from the political revolutions of the age, especially the French revolution. With the fall of the Bastille man was liberated from all fetters. The limitless freedom of human society was accompanied by a realization of a relationship-a bond between mankind and all other creations of God. In The Prelude Wordsworth says:

--- I was only
Contend, when with bliss ineffable
I felt the sentiment of Being spread
O’er all that moves and all that seemeth still;
O’er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
And human knowledge, to the human eye
Invisible, yet liveth to the heart.

Similarly in Lines Written in Early Spring he says:
To her fair works did nature link
The human soul that through me ran;

Wordsworth fought for the rights of man and also for the freedom of mankind—freedom from the darkness that dwells within man. In most of his poems he depict himself as a prophet, ‘the chosen one’ and claims that his job is to heal the wounded humanity and create a world where

…neither evil tongues,
Rash judgements,nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e’ver prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessing……… (129-135)

In his poem The World is too Much With Us Wordsworth says that man has given his heart to materialistic progress. He has become materialistic and can no longer think clearly. For his happiness and betterment man should restore communication with nature because only nature can lead his soul towards contentment and peace. Wordsworth emphasis that man’s perfection and greatness does not depend on physical or worldly advancement but in liberating himself from the lust and physical pleasures of this artificial life and by treading on the path of nature-the path of humanity. Wordsworth argues that man faces all sorts of hardships and sufferings in order to fulfill his worldly desires. He overcome every hindrance and avoid everything that he consider as harmful for his progress. Similarly if man perceive certain ills that affect his purity of soul, he must not aspire for them and shun all negative temptations. Man in his process of development must equip himself with those factors that contribute to his advancement towards nobility. Wordsworth was of the view that if man deviates from nature he will never be able to reach the high peaks of humanity. He had witnessed the Reign of Terror and learnt from his experience that if man does not observe restraint in life, he can become a bloodthirsty beast that cause great destruction to humanity. Wordsworth’s heroes are not from the elite classes but rustic men who lived a frugal life. He admired their simplicity, courage, hope and patience. They faced the problems of life with patience and craved no more. Wordsworth values virtue as one of the most important factors in nation building. He rejects the materialistic standards of the eighteenth century and
preaches man humanness which is the soul of man and also the soul of a society in which he lives. Wordsworth’s poetry is a protest against the artificialities of urban life. For Wordsworth mountains are not just object of nature but a framework in which healthy social order can maintain itself. In most of his poems people living in communities encircled by mountains are drawn into closer affections. 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 thought that simple life in the lap of nature is the solution of man’s worries. In The Prelude he demonstrates how he grew up in the company of nature and how he was fostered alike by beauty and by fear. Wordsworth shows that nature is not always beautiful; it frightens as well. But her rough mood is also for the well being of man. He depicts in his poetry the beauty and harmony of nature and enjoys her ‘Bliss of solitude.’ He declares that all which we behold in nature is full of blessing. Wordsworth experiences genuine happiness and peace of mind while strolling through nature. His sense perception combines with the moral influence of nature and he says:

……. purifying thus
    The element of feeling and of thought,
    And sanctifying, by such discipline,
    Both pain and fear, until we recognize
    A grandeur in the beating of the heart. (410-114)

Wordsworth thought that Man’s true character is formed and developed through participation in the harmony and balance of nature. Wordsworth claimed that people are at their best when they are closest to nature. Nature has the power to console the afflicted, and add sunshine to the dull life. It helps us to see clearly, to think and feel positively, and become more virtuous.

References
[4]. http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Poetry/PopeManA.htm