

# The Philosophical Study of Nature in William Wordsworth's Poetry

Badal Khan

Guest Faculty of Tarabari Higher Secondary School, Haripur, Barpeta, Assam.

## Abstract:

This paper aims at studying the conception of nature in William Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth's conception of nature was based on the relationship between man and nature, and it emphasized the role of nature in social life and spiritual redemption. As one of the remarkable representatives of the romantic period, William Wordsworth played an imperishable role in the development of English romantic poetry, and also laid a foundation for its further development. By analyzing the relationship between man and nature and constantly seeking the essence of life in nature, the poet attempted to find a way to solve the problems of the mankind. Although there have been a lot of researches on Wordsworth and his poetry, there are few studies that systematically analyze the conception of nature in William Wordsworth's poems by integrating his natural poetry into a whole. Based on William Wordsworth's personal experience and social background, this paper attempts to analyze the causes of the formation of Wordsworth's philosophy of nature. Through the careful interpretation of Wordsworth's natural poetry, this paper summarizes his philosophy of nature and its characteristics.

**Keywords: philosophy of nature, Romantic poetry, William Wordsworth, unity, divine**

## Introduction :

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the main founders of English romantic poetry. From 1843 to 1850, William Wordsworth was regarded as the "Poet Laureate".

Wordsworth was born in the Lake District, and he always believed that he fortunate to be born there. Unlike other famous English romantic poets, he enjoyed almost everything that remains on the lap of nature and he happily spends his childhood days under the tender care of his mother. Unfortunately, his mother died when was Wordsworth was only eight years old. Unable to bear the shock of his wife's death, Wordsworth's father passed away five years later. This tragic experience greatly influenced his later works. Of his five siblings, William Wordsworth had the best relationship with his youngest sister Dorothy, and she played a crucial role in his literary writings. After losing their parents, William Wordsworth and his siblings were sent off by their relatives to a grammar school at Hawkshead, and it was there that Wordsworth received an excellent education in art, literature, and mathematics. He showed a keen interest in the creation of poetry. After graduated from grammar school, Wordsworth attended St. John's College at Cambridge University (from 1787 to 1790). He always returned to his hometown and to nature during his winter and summer holidays. Before graduating from Cambridge, he traveled to several European countries in 1790. It was an experience which influenced both on his poetry creation and political sensibilities. The experience of living in France inspired Wordsworth's interests and sympathies for the common people. It was also the source of his latter works. And these works proved to be the most important works that influence Wordsworth's literary career. After taking his Cambridge degree, he returned to France in 1791 and fell in love with a French woman, Annette Vallon. Unfortunately, William Wordsworth had to return to England before their first child was born. The war between England and France was a trigger for Wordsworth's separation from his daughter and wife. It was not until his precious daughter Caroline was nine years old that Wordsworth met her for the first time. Those days back in England were the darkest times of Wordsworth's whole life. Wordsworth lived in London and he had nothing to do but to express his deep sympathy for beggars, children, farmers and other people who lived at the bottom of the society. At the same time, Wordsworth studied numerous literary works of his contemporaries and analyzed their writing methods and styles. This also laid a good literary foundation for him to create his unique conception of nature.

## A Brief Introduction to Romanticism:

"Romantic" is an indispensable term to describe the period from the late 18th century to the middle of the 19th century. This period was called the romantic era, and its mode and style of writing to fuel a literary movement was popularly known as romanticism. Different from the neoclassical era which had strict restraints, the romantic era moved away from it by advocating personal freedom, imagination and creativity. Since romanticism was the largest literary trend of the 18th century, its influence was felt across the erstwhile western academia and many of its precepts and beliefs were held in high esteem. In 1798, the publication of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's collective work *Lyrical Ballads* marked the beginning of the Romantic Era, and it ended with the demise of Sir Walter Scott in 1852. The most remarkable literary genre during that period was poetry. Romanticists preferred to reform the content and theory of poetry, and Wordsworth and Coleridge were the pioneers of this field. They advocated the massive revolution of poetic language and theme, which contrasted with the neoclassical poems. When we mentioned Romantic, there were six poets who immediately spring to our mind. These people believed that they were the "chosen" ones to guide other common people to break the contemporary situation of poetry. According to the writing styles and themes of their poems, these poets could mainly be divided into two groups. William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey were regarded as the first generation romantic poets. Since their poems were written when they lived in the English lake districts, they were also called "Lake Poets". In the beginning, they were influenced by the French Revolution and then devoted all their passion and energy to the revolution. But after suffering various failures, they chose to live in the lake districts which were far away from "madding crowds". For this reason, it is most likely to say that there were many negative elements in their poems, and their attitudes toward the societal affairs were indifferent. They preferred to depict natural scenery to social affairs. "Lake Poets" held similar poetic beliefs. They believed that poetry was such a sacred thing which could purify human spiritual and social morality. Imagination and intuition helped to penetrate deeper into the inner parts of things.

Wordsworth's philosophy of nature was like a sharp sword, which opened the way for the later development of the conception of nature. He focused on using the common words to illustrate his true feelings toward nature. Human beings were independent individuals who existed outside the nature. They needed to use all their senses to feel and understand nature. New romanticists took the more positive attitude towards nature, landscapes and social affairs. It wouldn't be wrong to say that new romanticists' writing style was inherited from the lake poets, and at times it was seen to surpass the writing methods of the lake poets themselves. Romantics centered on self-knowledge and tried to break the limitations of neoclassicism through personal imagination.

## **Purpose and Significance of the Study:**

The development of English romantic poetry could not be separated from Wordsworth's contribution. William Wordsworth published numerous poems which were strongly characterized by his incredible fascination of nature. Even these poems had been published more than 200 years ago, the ideas and concepts the poet formulated are still shared by many scholars, in particular in current times of progressing globalization, population explosion, and environmental pollution. Based on Wordsworth's passionate, authentic and remarkable way of illustrating nature's beauty and grandeur, this piece of narrative will analyze and interpret a few select poems of Wordsworth to show his appreciation of nature as well as the characteristic features of his poetry. As one of the founders of English romantic poetry, William Wordsworth's works have a unique place when it comes to the hardcore pursuit of English romantic literature. In this endeavour, a crisp study on William Wordsworth's poetry and his philosophy of nature has been displayed, which is helpful to grasp the English romantic literature, as a whole.

## **Study on Wordsworth:**

Wordsworth's works have been a popular read in both western and eastern literary world. However, having reviewed many works credited to him it is found that there are just a

handful of works to analyze Wordsworth's conception of nature as a whole. Therefore, this write-up will continue to analyze the courses of Wordsworth's conception of nature from historical origins, characteristics and its realistic enlightening aspects.

## Research

## Questions:

Based on the previous studies, my research questions are as follow:

- (1) What causes the formation of Wordsworth's philosophy of nature?
- (2) What are the characteristics of Wordsworth's philosophy of nature?
- (3) What is the realistic enlightenment of Wordsworth's works to modern life?

## The Historical Origins of Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature:

The whole industrial revolution could be divided into two distinct phases. The first industrial revolution occurred from 1750 to 1850, and the second from 1850 to 1914. The industrial revolution originated in Great Britain and gradually spread across the world. Generally speaking, the first industrial revolution was the process of revolution from handicraft economy to the economy which was dominated by machine and technology. The main features of the first industrial revolution were socioeconomic, technological and culture. It changed people's life from various ways. For example, human beings began to use the new materials, such as iron and steel, and new energies, such as coal, the steam energy and electricity, which had replaced traditional energy sources. But science technology was like the double-edged sword. On the one hand, it took convenience and happiness to mankind. On the other hand, it brought various problems. The most significant one was the pollution of the environment. In the 19th century, the capitalist industrial revolution had brought abundant material wealth, which had blinded the public to pay no heed to the environment. At the same time, a large number of waste gas, sewage and industrial waste were discharged directly into nature. It is, therefore, justifiable to say that the industrial revolution not only deprived the hometown of

human beings, but also threaten human life and health.

In Wordsworth's poetry, the poet displayed a profound thought to the behavior of human beings in pillaging natural resources and destroying the environment. The degeneration of human nature was also one of themes that concerns the poet. And all these thoughts could be reflected from Wordsworth's poem Lucy Gray. In Wordsworth's poems, there existed the bright moon, fawns, hares, and any excellent things one could imagine. With the most lucid language and simple words, Wordsworth described the pretty Lucy and the natural surroundings of her residence. William Wordsworth regarded little Lucy as the rose of June, which was pure, beautiful and flowery. The rose of the June, to him, was one of the most fascinating thing for William Wordsworth, and he concerned that the excessive greed of human beings would make this beautiful thing suddenly disappear from the world. His love of nature prompted him to write poems to call people to care for the nature. Human beings not only needed to pay attention to their own interests but also to the benefits of the next generations. William Wordsworth was convinced that the relationship between man and nature was intimate and indivisible, so his poems expressed his love of nature, his strong criticism of the destruction of nature and his desires to construct a harmonious society. In his famous poem The Solitary Reaper, William Wordsworth wrote, " No Nightingale did ever chaunt. More welcome notes to weary bands. Of travellers in some shady haunt, Among the farthest He brides." (1807) In this poem, William Wordsworth described a rustic country girl, who was alone cutting the wheat. Contemporary scholars believed that the formation of Wordsworth's philosophy of nature was influenced and civilized by many literary schools, and the most striking of those was Rousseau's return to 'nature' theory.

## Conclusion:

In the conclusion, this narrative attempts to analyze William Wordsworth's philosophy of nature. The first one was human nature. William Wordsworth claimed that nature was the symbol of human nature. Just like human beings, nature have its wisdom and power. The second one was rational nature. Nature was the collection of reason and emotion. Nature have the magical power to heal the wounded heart and soothe the restless mind. The third one was

divine nature. William Wordsworth claimed that nature was the incarnation of God, and everything in nature was divine. Nature was the ultimate spiritual home of human beings. It is quite obvious that Wordsworth had to wish to rebuild the relationship between human and nature. Returning to nature was the only way for man to get self-redemption. Wordsworth's adoration toward nature and its objects is deep rooted in his personal experiences. As a result, Wordsworth renders a new definition of nature and it breaks decorum of neoclassical mode of writings. His influence as a true nature poet has a far reaching impetus for the generations to come. William Wordsworth's advocacy for the conservation of nature caused great repercussions in the industrial society at that time. The way industry developed at the expense of nature made people rethink about their behavior. In fact, Wordsworth's advocacy had a great influence not only on his contemporaries, but also on the way of modern life. Nowadays, humans have achieved unprecedented feats, but the contradiction between man and nature has been going up terribly. Global warming, environmental pollution and other environmental issues have begun to attract the attentions of environmentalists. People have realised that the deterioration of ecological environment would affect the survival and development of human beings. Chinese government has increased its investment in environmental protection in recent years. Therefore, in the fourth plenary session of the 16th central committee, the representatives put forward the strategic goal of building a harmonious society. Harmony between man and nature is always the basic feature of constructing a harmonious society. Only by caring for nature and protecting nature can human society develop into a truly civilized society. This paper summarizes William Wordsworth's philosophy of life with particular attention to nature and its phenomena and also its characteristics through careful analysis and interpretation of his poetry, which is most likely to be a great help in the study of Wordsworth and his poetic creed. But we must admit that due to the lack of sufficient information and literature, we do not have a comprehensive understanding of William Wordsworth, and the personal analysis of Wordsworth is not enough- that's one part of it. Secondly, with the limited insight and understanding this piece of writing has been attempted and that's why it shall always remain a subject to be criticised and which is perfectly alright.

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