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## **Man and Nature: An Ecocritical Study of Wordsworth's Poems**

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### **Abstract**

In the postmodern age man has used nature according to his own will denying the independent entity of it. But the ecocritics have revolted against this notion of man vis-a-vis nature. They have argued and propagated the indispensable existence of 'independent' nature. The Romantics, especially Wordsworth was a votary of nature. His literature bears the testimony of his love, respect and gratitude towards nature. How nature shapes the individual human mind has been the locus of his literary ventures. The present paper will be served to evaluate and asses the poetry of Wordsworth from ecocritical perspective.

**Keywords**

Nature; Ecocriticism; Human soul and mind.

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I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. ("I Wandered Lonely..." 1-6)

The Romantics, especially Wordsworth's association with nature is legendary. Indubitably Romantic poetry's primary theme is nature. But Wordsworth has elevated the theme to the worship of nature through poetry. His poems are the palpable testimony of his being votary of nature. He not only writes poetry about nature but also he lives in nature. He is probably the one man who dislikes all the aspects of chaotic city life in favor of the serenity amid nature. Geoffrey Hartman argues that Wordsworth treats nature as merely a means through which the individual mind, the Imagination, could transcend the material world ("Romance" 296). Instead of merely describing nature as an external object or a place out there, Wordsworth's poetry self-consciously imbibes the sense of place and ecological conscience. Being a critic of industrial culture, Wordsworth reveals the need for a radical change of heart, a complete rejection of utilitarianism that makes economic progress at the expense of the weak and nature. His disenchantment with the material life is evident in the poem "The World is too much with us":

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 away, a sordid boon! (1-6)

He is of the opinion that great joys and spiritual blessings are found in close communication and association with nature. “Out of tune” with nature, man has lost his greatest gifts, his ability to respond to nature and to be moved by its simple beauty or awesome power. J. R. Watson points out that the doctrine of nature in Wordsworth’s poetry is an unremitting campaign against the destruction of the individual by material and social pressures. An ever-recurring theme in Wordsworth’s poetry is that humans have lost touch with nature because of their mundane desires and commodification of nature. Implicit in this complaint is the poet’s disenchantment with the all-enveloping Industrial Revolution in England at the time. Hartman himself states that Wordsworth sees nature as “a presence and a power,” not an object, and that the poet’s “sense of mission” is to protect the earth because the human imagination needs to coexist physically and intellectually with it (“Romance” 290, 304).

The ecocritics have brought into fore this inescapable relationship between man and nature and sought to reveal the significant influence of nature upon human in literary ventures. Ecocriticism as a concept first emerged in 1970s in the meeting of Western Literature Association where to find out the genesis of the term ‘ecocriticism’, Michael P. Branch has attributed the credit to William Rueckert. Later in 1989 the US critic Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the founders of this theory revived the term ‘ecocriticism’ and defined the present notion of this theory. He has asserted: “Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Barry 239).

Glotfelty with Harold Fromm published a collection of essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literay Ecology*. Jonathan Bate, the most notable figure of ecocriticism on the British side authored *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. These two books are the

cornerstone of this theory. The ecocritics reject the notion that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. Nature is not at all constructed since it really does exist. Peter Barry has clarified:

Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed, as ‘always already’ textualised into ‘discourse’, but ecocriticism calls this long-standing theoretical orthodoxy into question, sometimes rather impatiently, as in Kate Soper’s frequently-quoted remark (in her seminal book *What is Nature?*) that ‘It isn’t language which has a hole in its ozone layer.’ Ecocriticism, then, repudiates the foundational belief in ‘constructedness’... (Barry 243)

Ecocritics regard nature as ‘always already there’. The human beings are a part of nature. So, nature has indubitably an unavoidable influence upon the humans. To induce this impact of nature, the ecocritics have cited the works of Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau et al. The ecocritical critics bring out the binary between the nature and culture advocating the shaping effect of nature upon the culture of man. Bate remarks:

The ‘Romantic ecology’ reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things: it proclaims that there is “one life” within us and abroad, that the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at our peril. (*Romantic Ecology* 40)

Wordsworth’s understanding about nature may authentically be termed “ecological,” since for the first time in the Western tradition it evinces the essential elements of a modern ecological world-view. Living at the dawn of the industrial era, the poet spoke of cultivating a new and more elaborate mentality capable of understanding the intricate processes and intrinsic value of nature Wordsworth has prescribed: “Let Nature be your Teacher,” in “The Table Turned,” which contains several lines that embody the romantic belief in the

sacredness of nature. Wordsworth's most desirous work *The Prelude* is abound with the religious terms that are attributed to nature. The poem bears the testimony that why he is an ardent pantheist, the votary of nature. This literary venture of the poet is a very authentic documentation of the poet's inner self. At the very inception he depicts how much jubilant and joyous he is being escaped from the city life:

... escaped  
From the vast city, where I long had pined  
A discontented sojourner: now free,  
Free as a bird to settle where I will. (*The Prelude* 6-9)

The epical poem vivifies the shaping faculty of nature upon the poet's psyche. Indeed nature serves to be the teacher of the poet. The poem maintains a unity of feeling, regarding human behavior and nature springing directly from Wordsworth's own mind and personality. The poet accounts that how in the early boyhood days he got perplexed at the bewildering diversities of nature. The mountains, hills, trees, fruits and flowers – all these natural sights and objects cast a spell on the sensitive mind of the boy. But gradually through intimate communion with nature Wordsworth learnt the highest truth of life. In nature he found a never failing principle of joy and purest passion. Nature to Wordsworth is a living soul, an entity. He has ventured in his poetry to find out the beauty of nature in meadow, woodland, and the mountain top. He has also asserted that how nature plays a significant role in the process of the composition of poetry:

For I, me thought, while the sweet breath of heaven  
Was blowing on my body, felt within  
A correspondent breeze, that gently moved  
With quickening virtue, but is now become  
A tempest, a redundant energy,  
Vexing its own creation. (*The Prelude* 34-39)

His poem “The Prelude” is thus a record of the powerful and inescapable bond between nature and the mind of man. Another seminal poem, “Tintern Abbey” records the poet’s growth. In this poem he goes on to explicate the two contrastive feelings vis-à-vis nature. The poet then recalls when first he came here as a young man, whatever appealed to his senses enraptured him without stirring him to meditation. The youth had passed the stage of boyhood’s “glad animal movements” and had become adolescent when nature “was all in all”. In his youth, the experience of nature was his master. And now he still finds a divine spirit in nature, a spirit that he recognizes as a part of his own soul. He becomes overjoyed visiting Tintern Abbey after five years. He delineates how ecstatic he becomes hearing the waters ‘rolling from their mountain springs with a soft inland murmur’. The ‘steep and lofty cliffs’ in a ‘wild secluded scene’, the quiet sky, the cottage ground, the orchard tufts, the hedgerows- all enthrall him greatly. Even he describes the blessing of nature while he is not amid nature:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the ‘din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; (“Tintern Abbey” 25-28)

He also explains that his mind’s perspective is now changed. He realizes that nature has actually molded him into a deeper, mellowed mind. Nature has made him ‘a man’. The ‘coarser pleasures’ of his boyish days is now elevated into a sense of pantheism. The daffodils are “Fluttering and dancing in the breeze / ... tossing their heads in sprightly dance” as if they own the human senses (“I wandered lonely as a cloud” 6, 12). The budding trigs are animated, spreading out their leaf-fans with a conscious intention of catching the fresh and healthy air. Despite the wonderful natural world that soothes and inspires the human mind, the poet is troubled because humanity has alienated itself

from nature and nature's holy play. For the collapse in the connection between man and nature, man alone is to blame.

Instead of looking to exotic, distant, or wild places to establish a dialogue with nature, Wordsworth simply interacted with his immediate world of the Lake District. Being born and having grown up in the Lake District, the beautiful area of lakes, streams, and mountains near the Scottish border in Northwest England, Wordsworth spent his childhood roaming about the countryside and getting to know the country people there. He was rooted in the Lake District and argued against the exploitation of the natural world and its inhabitants. He recognized interdependence in a particular place, and his poetry emerged 'from the lived experience of dwelling in the English Lake District'. In "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1802) Wordsworth defends his choice of portraying "low and rustic life" in a "language really used by men" as a means to understand and communicate deeper human feelings and philosophic truths (597). His personae conceive the Lake District as a sacred place humans should respect. Many of his poems express the moral depth of small farmers and shepherds who act as the "voice of nature". The pastoral poem *Michael*, for example, presents the Shepherd, who has valuable knowledge of nature, respectfully hearing the music of the winds, and caring about his ecosystem: land, sheep and family. The relationships of Wordsworth's personae with their local ecosystems are of reciprocity, interdependency, and equality.

It could now be affirmed from the above discussion that Wordsworth's poetry reveals the intrinsic relationship of man with nature, the inescapable influence of nature upon man, in short, the inevitable bond between man and nature. Nature continues to be an indispensable entity, a 'presence'. The ecocritics hail this bonding. They attribute special emphasis to writers who present nature as a major part of their subject matter. Wordsworth will surely be the cup of tea to the ecocritics. Hartman asserts that for Wordsworth the

growth of the human mind is completed only when nature ‘entices the brooding soul out of itself, toward nature first, then toward humanity’. When Wordsworth tries to describe a picturesque landscape in repose, the immediate, local, sublime story of the subaltern breaks through to reveal itself to the reader. His poetry counters the pastoral and picturesque artists’ attempts to hide or justify the oppression of the ‘others’ by being socially and environmentally progressive. He is ‘a staunch defender’ of a long-term, resilient, sustainable, “subsistence mode of agriculture,” and is ‘consistently opposed to the development and improvement’ of rural landscapes.

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