

William Wordsworth's Ecocritical Outlook in The Light of Transcendentalism

Dr. (Mrs.) Varsha Saraswat¹; Gour Hari Mondal²

¹Professor Department of Languages, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities Anand Vihar College for Women, M.P., India

²Research Scholar, Stream: English Mansarovar Global University Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh and Assistant Professor, Department of English Sabang Sajanikanta Mahavidyalaya (Vidyasagar University) West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author Email: gourharimondal53@gmail.com

Abstract— William Wordsworth has explored nature in a more interesting way and has considered it as a separate entity. It is true that nature has forever been a source of inspiration for poets throughout history. Yet it has also come under observation that often nature in poetry has been associated with the idle mind as opposed to the idyllic. Wordsworth was influenced by Rousseau and Godwin. Wordsworth was committed to the theory of the mind once and for all. It has been said that he was drunk with God and Nature. William Wordsworth has evoked the divinity of nature and explored transcendentalism in his renowned poems. We can't be healthy in an unhealthy environment. It is our own best interest to preserve the natural world as much as we can. By examining the important role of nature, a new literary theory has been developed that is known as Eco-criticism. The chief focus of ecocriticism is the relationship man shares with nature. With the upsurging crisis in ecology, it becomes necessary to study human-nature relationships more intimately.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Nature, Environment.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”

Genesis 1:1

Jonathan Bate in his introduction to ‘Romantic Ecology’ makes us aware by saying

Literary criticism has never been a pure discipline. Ever since Plato and Aristotle argued over whether poets are harmful or beneficial to the state, political and moral concerns have borne in upon the discussion of literature. Inevitably and properly this will be the case so long as poetry continues to have any effect on how we understand ourselves, how we think about the ways in which we live our lives”

Before plunging into an examination of Wordsworth's works to write on the present topic, it would be better to begin first with the two most important terms: Transcendentalism and Eco-criticism.

TRANSCENDENTALISM: is a philosophical, spiritual, and literary movement that developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in New England region of the United States. A core belief of transcendentalists is in the inherent goodness of people and nature. The transcendentalists believed in the innate divinity of every person and faith in his or her capability to understand immortality, the soul, and God through intuition rather than reason.

ECOCRITICISM: is an area of literary criticism that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, concerned with the relationship between literature and the natural world and with rediscovering and reinterpreting nature writings.

Now, comes the question: how transcendentalism is connected with ecocriticism and how Wordsworth's ecocritical outlook is nourished by transcendentalism?

Transcendentalists have a deep reverence and admiration for nature, not only for aesthetic end, but also as an instrument to observe and comprehend the structured inner workings of the natural world.

R. W. Emerson in *Nature* (1836) asserts, “the foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face...” and raises the fundamental question: “why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”

The philosophy that there is a fundamental bond between the self and the world that Wordsworth voices in “Tintern Abbey” parallels the latter teachings of transcendentalist philosophers. It's fact that popular American transcendentalist R. W. Emerson visited Europe to meet his ideals, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Wordsworth, who no doubt reinforced his beliefs.

Alan Grob in his *The Philosophic Mind* argued for a Wordsworth who moved from empiricism (1797-99) to transcendentalism (1804). The element of transcendentalism employs the theme of nature and this sets William Wordsworth's attitude towards nature in his poetry, apart from his other contemporaries.

It is true that nature forever has been a source of impulse for poets throughout ages. Though poets like John Denham, Alexander Pope and John Dyer have focused on nature under the Topographical poetry or Loco-descriptive poetry, the importance on nature was given particularly after the publication of 'Lyrical Ballads' in 1798 which was a joint venture of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Wordsworth was deeply influenced by nature.

Representation of the natural environment is as old as recorded literature, and were prominent in the account of the Garden of Eden in the Hebrew Bible. Human beings are seen as beings whose spiritual nature places them midway between the animality of beasts and the divinity of gods. The Romantic Period of early nineteenth century was the turning point in the long Western tradition of human transcendence and domination over nature. Being our first true ecological poet, Wordsworth voiced a powerful and enduring vision of human unification with nature which exerted a formative influence on later conservation movements and is of instantaneous relevance to great ecological issues today.

Jonathan Bate in 'The Song of the Earth' writes:

"From Shakespeare's time to Jane Austen's, the old and the new senses of 'culture' existed side by side. But in the nineteenth century, with the diminution of the proportion of the population involved in tillage and the rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization, the old sense died and the new one was further developed"

Jonathan Bate, in 'Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition' (1991) details the emergence, in Wordsworth and his English contemporaries and successors, of an environmental and ecological consciousness. Wordsworth in his eighth book of 'The Excursion' (1814) says "I grieve, when on the darker side / Of this great change I look; and there behold / Such outrage done to nature" by 'social Industry's command'.

In the book *The Closing Circle* (1971), Barry Commoner lays out four basic and inescapable laws of ecology. If we consider his first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else", we must accept that literature does not sail above the material world in some aesthetic firmament, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact.

Although Wordsworth's poetry is widely analyzed in terms of mystical and philosophical aspects of nature, yet his concern for ecology has to be explored. An examination of Wordsworth's poems in the light of Eco-criticism might be useful in establishing his position as a poet for future generations. Wordsworth's poem "The Simpon Pass" depicts the effects of forestation. He seems to create awareness against the ongoing impact of human civilization on nature "The immeasurable height/ Of woods decaying, never to be decayed".

Wordsworth's definition of the nature of poetry as propounded in the 1802 'Preface' is important, and has to be quoted at length before we proceed further. He states: "...poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to that it is carried on..." Poetry, according to Wordsworth, should seek to present the image of man and nature. The poets of his age, he felt, did not look "steadily at the object". As a result, they could not portray man and nature truthfully. His poetry would be close to real life, it was for the reason of presenting the basic human affections that he went to the common and rustic folk. Nature inhabits in his poems as a separate or independent entity and is not treated in a casual or passing manner. Wordsworth follows Nature in a way different from that of Pope. Unlike Pope, Wordsworth truly believed that in town life and its distractions men had overlooked nature and that they had paid for it. Constant social intercourse had dissipated their energy and talents and vitiated the susceptibility of their hearts to simple and pure impression. One of his sonnets is eloquent about this idea:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,

Getting and spending, we waste our powers;

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

A sense of the health and integrity of the life of nature, in contrast with the depredations by humanity is exemplified in 'Lyrical Ballads' by Wordsworth's 'Lines Written in Early Spring':

I heard a thousand blended notes,
 While in a grove I state reclined,
 In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
 Bring sad thoughts to the mind

Again to shed light on the ecological awareness of Wordsworth's poetry, his poem 'The Tables Turned' (1798) is a great example to prove that Wordsworth has a strong faith in the great power of Nature that educates human mind and guides it to the perfect direction. In this poem Wordsworth states that Nature is the ultimate source of perfect health, wealth, and cheerfulness. He writes:

One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good,
 Than all the sages can.

In his 'Lucy Poems' we find nature makes Lucy spontaneous and free, although with a sense of bond to a greater law than mere mortal conventions her nature morally good. In his 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' Wordsworth regrets the passing of a childhood state when the immortal origins of the soul seemed everywhere apparent. 'Tintern Abbey' which is considered one of the great masterpieces of Wordsworth combines poetry with philosophy and articulates the doctrine of the New Age. In this poem the poet narrates the great power of the contemplation of a beautiful scene of nature to heal and soothe the perturbed mind of man, and to give him thrills of pleasure. In this poem he emphasized the moral influence of Nature. He spiritualized Nature and considered her as a great moral teacher, as the best mother, guardian and nurse of man. He believed that there exists between man and nature a spiritual bond. "The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,/ The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all moral being." (111-113; Tintern Abbey)

CONCLUSION

Some literary critics do not associate Wordsworth's poetry with ecocriticism because they believe that his poetic purpose was to transcend the social and natural world in order to sympathize with and inspire the human imagination. However, Hartman states that Wordsworth saw nature as a 'presence and a power', not an entity and that the poet's visionary fervour to protect the earth because the human imagination needs to coexist physically and intellectually with it. Wordsworth disapprove the assumption that humans should dominate nature and in his poetry he adroitly attempts to justify his own view. In this sense he is truly the most environmentally conscious poet of the Romantic age of English literature.

WORKS CITED

1. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning India, 2008.
2. Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. Routledge, 1991.
3. Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. London: Picador, 2000b.
4. Davies, Hunter. *Wordsworth's Biography*. New York Press, 1980.
5. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature" in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Random House, 2000
6. Smith, D. N. *Wordsworth: Poetry and Prose*. Oxford UP, 1921.

Internet:

7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism>
