



E-Content

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2. What is the relationship between innocence and experience as Blake sees it?

3. How did Blake's views go against the prevailing ideas?

27.8 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)

Wordsworth is a prominent leader of the Romantic Movement in England. He supported the French Revolution in its early phase, but his liberalism gradually dwindled. In 1795, he met S.T. Coleridge and this meeting was beneficial to both of them. They jointly authored *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which is considered to be the beginning of the Romantic Movement in England. On the urging of Coleridge, Wordsworth explained the guiding principles of this new movement in his preface to the second edition of the book published in 1800. (We shall discuss the preface in detail in the next section). In addition to many lyrics, Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude* (1850), a sort of spiritual autobiography as its subtitle, "The Growth of a Poet's Mind," indicates. As the title suggests the *Prelude* is the first of a three-part poem *The Recluse*. The second part entitled *The Excursion* was published in 1814, but the third part was never written.

Wordsworth is better known for his short poems like "Tintern Abbey" and "Immortality Ode" than for his long and ambitious works. "Tintern Abbey" recounts three stages in the development of the poet's love of nature; (1) sensuous animal passion, (2) moral influence, and (3) mystical communion. "Michael" deals with the sturdiness of character and nature's healing power. The five "Lucy Poems" are also popular. In "Ode on Intimations of Immortality", Wordsworth attributes a child's wisdom and glory to the unconscious memory of a previous life. "Resolution and Independence" is yet another memorable poem. Wordsworth influenced modern thinking on the natural goodness of childhood, the moral value of simple living and the inspiring and healing powers of nature. Wordsworth seems to have attempted to translate into action both in his life and in his work the principle: "Simple living and high thinking". (A separate unit on Wordsworth discusses in detail his poetic achievement).

27.8.1 Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry

Wordsworth's observations prefixed to *Lyrical Ballads*, generally called "Preface" to the second edition of 1800, is his manifesto in which he discusses a number of issues related to the art of poetry. These issues include the nature of poetry, the creation of poetry, the impact of the poem on the reader, and the difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry. The poet's views on these important topics are scattered throughout the preface and we have to piece together what he had said on each question.

First, the question of the subject matter. "Incidents and situations from common life" are chosen. Wordsworth thought that rustic and humble life is better suited for "the essential passions of the heart". He believed that the emotions of the rural people are simpler, purer and perhaps better than those of the city-dweller. He also thought that people living in the midst of nature have a better moral attitude, and they become part of the sense of divinity present in nature.

The second innovation is the use of "a selection of language really used by men". Wordsworth attacked the so-called poetic diction of an earlier generation. Poetic diction is a painstaking invention and hence far removed from the living speech of ordinary people. The common speech or a selection of it, Wordsworth felt, is more appropriate to describe the incidents and situations from common life. Throughout the preface Wordsworth repeatedly states that "simple and unelaborated expressions" as his choice. "My purpose was to imitate, and as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men; and such personifications [of abstract ideas] do not make any natural or regular part of that language."

Wordsworth finds a moral justification for poetry. The aim of the poet, in his view, is to correct men's feelings, to render these feelings more consonant with eternal nature. A poet provides us with spiritual exercises in order to give us new feelings and make our feelings more sane and pure.

The creative process is explained by Wordsworth in the following words:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually 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 successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on."

Implicit in this explanation of how poetry is created is a psychological approach.

Wordsworth discussed the difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose. He says: "It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." This is a major point of disagreement between Wordsworth and Coleridge. Similarly, Wordsworth's views on metre are questioned by Coleridge. According to Wordsworth metre is a kind of restraining influence. By its regularity, metre holds passion in check. Also, metre seems to give poetry a kind of unreality:

"The end of poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure... Now the co-presence of something regular... cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling, and of feeling not strictly and necessarily connected with the passion."

The Romantics give a high place to the poet; they endow him with the ability to speak to other men. Wordsworth asserts:

"He [the poet] is a man speaking to men; a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common among mankind;"

A poet is related to other men who have the same ingredients, but the poet has them in greater measure.

Thus the preface discusses a wide range of topics concerning poetry and the innovations which *Lyrical Ballads* has introduced.

Self-Check Exercise 7

1. What are the three stages in the development of Wordsworth's attitude to nature in "Tintern Abbey?"

2. Why did Wordsworth choose rustic life as his subject matter?

3. Explain Wordsworth's views on the use of the language of common people.

4. What, according to Wordsworth, is the aim of the poet?

5. How did Wordsworth explain the creative process of poetry?

6. What is the difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose in Wordsworth's view? Is it valid?

7. What is the role of meter in poetry, according to the "preface"?

8. What is the position of a poet in society? How does he compare with ordinary men?

27.8.2 Wordsworth's Practice of his Theory

For all his commitment to "the language really used by men" Wordsworth could not help using archaisms, words of Latin origin, and inversion of normal word order in several of his well-known poems including "Immortality Ode" and *The Prelude*. For instance in "Immortality Ode", he used "apparelled" and "celestial", in *The Prelude* he used "recreant", "inscrutable", "discordant" which are polysyllabic words derived from Latin. Then there are archaisms like 'shod' (shoe) 'deigned' (desired) 'springles' (traps). There are also inversions, of word order in plurases like "by the vision splendid" for the sake of rhyme. In "Resolution and Independence", we have:

Or again, "Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face,"
"Motionless as a cloud that old Man stood".

Wordsworth must have realized that the demands of his poetic art are more important than a rigid adherence to his theory as enunciated in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*.

27.8.3 Wordsworth's Partnership with Coleridge

Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge met in 1795. Coleridge spotted talent in Wordsworth and praised him as "the best poet of the age". The two friends met almost daily, discussed poetry, and composed large quantities of poetry. Their association was so close that the same phrases occur in the poems of both. They collaborated in some poems; they exchanged thoughts and lines of poetry. Coleridge helped Wordsworth in completing the latter's unfinished poems. *Lyrical Ballads* was the fruit of this extraordinary partnership. The famous "Preface" of 1800 was also a result of consultation between the two poets.

Of the two sorts of poetry based on the theme, Coleridge agreed to choose the supernatural and Wordsworth the ordinary. Accordingly, Coleridge wrote "The Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth wrote many of his poems for the *Lyrical Ballads*.

However, serious differences developed between the two on important questions. Coleridge did not agree with many parts of the "Preface". He objected to them as he considered them "erroneous". Some of Wordsworth's statements appeared to contradict "other parts of the same preface and the author's own practice in the greater number of the poems themselves". One such question was the difference between the language of poetry and that of prose. Wordsworth thought that there was no essential difference between the two. Coleridge thought they were different. He argued that metre is essential for poetry which implies passion.

27.9 S. T. COLERIDGE (1772-1834)

Since there is a separate unit on Coleridge, we shall briefly touch upon the major achievements of Coleridge here. He was a man of many parts; poet, philosopher, journalist, preacher, lecturer, playwright, literary critic and literary theorist. He pioneered a movement against the mechanistic psychology of the eighteenth century. More than the other Romantics, he recognised the supremacy of imagination as a creative power. *Biographia Literaria* (1817), is a seminal work dealing with his philosophy of poetry and a critical statement of Romantic ideas. It is in this book that he explains how he had dealt with the supernatural in his poetry. He attempted to give "a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith".

Coleridge tries to differentiate between the two key terms, 'fancy' and 'imagination' in the same book. He called *imagination* the "shaping and modifying" power, *fancy*, the "aggregative and associative" power. The former "struggles to idealize and to unify", while the latter is only "a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space". To illustrate his point, Coleridge said that Milton had a highly imaginative mind whereas Cowley had a fanciful one. Imagination itself is of two kinds, *primary* and *secondary*. Primary imagination, in Coleridge's view, is the organ of common perception through the senses, secondary imagination is poetic vision. The latter one is the faculty that the poet ideally exercises. Fancy seems to correspond with the eighteenth century notion of wit in poetry the faculty that enables the poet to put together metaphors and similes. Coleridge criticizes the mechanical sort of apparatus in poetry, exemplified by the fancy, which the imagination transcends. The use of the secondary imagination is a mystical operation. The secondary imagination mediates between man and nature and indicated the organic unity of the universe. Coleridge's discussion of Wordsworth's faults and merits is a balanced presentation. His criticism of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights is of great value. He attempted to find "the essences of Shakespeare's ideas to discover the laws that a great work of art creates within itself". He explained the nature of poetic expression and sought to

answer the question "What is poetry"? His views on criticism are particularly significant as he was also an accomplished poet.

Coleridge is remembered for three poems, *The Ancient Mariner*, *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*. All the three have the stamp of originality, all of them arise from the world of dreams, the subconscious. *The Ancient Mariner* is a ballad with memorable images and phrases. *Kubla Khan* is a vision poem seen in an opium dream. *Christabel* is a poetic fragment which evokes the medieval atmosphere through suggestion.

As a literary theorist and as a poet, Coleridge made original contributions and his influence in these two areas is permanent.

Self-Check Exercise 8

1. What are Wordsworth's shortcomings in practising his theory?

2. What are the positive aspects of Wordsworth's collaboration with Coleridge?

3. What are the points of disagreement between Wordsworth and Coleridge?

4. Explain Coleridge's ideas on fancy and imagination.

5. What is Coleridge's contribution to criticism?

27.10 THE SECOND GENERATION OF ROMANTIC POETS

Three poets Byron, Shelley and Keats, belong to the second generation of Romantic poets. Although they do not belong to a school, they have many resemblances. They were all "rebellious geniuses" who were not recognized or understood in their country and time. All of them died young before they could realize their full potential. They are thus "the inheritors of unfulfilled renown".

27.10.1 Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Byron's reputation as a poet and as a personality outside his own country was immense. He had influenced several French and German poets. His life itself was like a romantic poem and he is the hero of his poems. The 'Byronic hero' has