

# Wordsworth as a Romantic Critic

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**Abstract:** William Wordsworth was an English romantic poet, who helped launch the romantic poetry era, along with his counterpart Samuel Coleridge. In his 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads', Wordsworth provides his audience of an understanding of his style of poetry. He stays away from the complex verbose and mind-boggling poetry presented before his time. He claims that poetry is something that comes naturally by feelings that have been deeply fostered and thought out. He also believes that poetry can be on multiple topics and not restricted on one subject, which is wholly true as poetry has been arranged on multiple topics and not necessarily linked to the natural aspects that Wordsworth highly prescribes. Wordsworth's philosophy of life, his theory of poetry, and his political credo were all intricately connected. Wordsworth explains that creative process involves four stages before the poetic composition takes place. These are observation, recollection, contemplation and imaginative excitement. Wordsworth's description of creative process has been subject of much criticism over the years. Wordsworth goes against the neo-classic view that poetry should both instruct and delight when he stresses that the function of poetry is to give pleasure a noble and exalted kind of pleasure which results from increased understanding and sympathy.

**Keywords:-** Romantic, creative process, observation, recollection, contemplation.

## Introduction

William Wordsworth (7 April 177-23 April 1850) was a major English romantic poet who, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic age in English literature with their joint publication *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Wordsworth was an early leader of romanticism in English poetry and ranks as one of the greatest lyric poets in the history of English literature. He was born as second of five children in the lake District. After the death of his mother in 1778, his father sent him to Hawkshead Grammar school. In 1783 his father, a lawyer and a Solicitor died. He went to St John's College, Cambridge in 1787. In 1793 Wordsworth published the poetry collections. An evening walk and Descriptive sketches'. In 1795 he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Somerset. Together they produced *Lyrical Ballads* (1798); an important landmark in the literary history of England. It has been rightly called the unofficial manifesto of the Romantic Movement. Wordsworth was primarily a poet and not a critic. He was very conscious of the fact that he was writing a new kind of poetry. As he himself states, "His aim was to create taste by which his poems may be enjoyed". Wordsworth meant the preface to be a pamphlet of propaganda. But it turned out to be a piece of great literary criticism. When Wordsworth took to write poetry, it was neo-classical criticism which held the day held sway. Poetry was judged on the basis of rules devised by the ancient writers like Horace and Virgil. Wordsworth is the first critic to turn his attention from the form of poetry to its substance. He says that his poetry is an attack on "the gaudiness and the inane phraseology", of the 18<sup>th</sup> century writers his criticism is of great historical importance. He is concerned with the nature of poetry, its functions, the qualification of a poet and the process of poetic creation. Poetry is no longer considered a mere imitation but becomes the expression emotion and imagination. Pleasure rather than instruction becomes the end of poetry. Says Margaret Drabble, "By laying emphasis on simplicity in theme and treatment. Wordsworth conquered new territories for poetry."

## Romantic Literary Criticism

English literary criticism of the Romantic era is most closely associated with the writings William Wordsworth in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Modern critics disagree on whether the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge constituted a major break with the criticism of their predecessors or if it should more properly be characterized as a continuation of the aesthetic theories of seventeenth—and eighteenth-century German and English Writers.

In 1800, in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth issued his famous proclamation about the nature of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." With this statement, Wordsworth posited a very different view of poetry than was standard at the time, shifting the center of attention from the work as a reflection of imitation of reality to the artist, and the artist's relationship to the work. Poetry would henceforth be considered and expressive rather than a mimetic art. Although the analogy of art as a mirror was still used, M.H. Abrams reports that the early Romantics suggested that the mirror was turned inward to reflect the poet's state of mind, rather than outward to reflect external reality. William Hazlitt in his "On Poetry in General" (1818) addressed the changes in this analogy "by combining the mirror with a lamp, in order to demonstrate that a poet reflects a world already bathed in an emotional light he has himself projected," according to Abrams. Additionally, music replaced painting as the art form considered most like poetry by the Romantics. Abrams explain that the German writers of the 1790s considered music "to be the art most immediately expressive of spirit and emotion," and both Hazlitt and John Keble made similar connections between music and poetry in their critical writings.

According to Cantor, “the artist stands above society as a prophetic visionary, leading it into the future, while free of its past and not engaged in its present activities (in the sense of being essential unaffected and above all uncorrupted by them.)”

### Wordsworth’s theory of Poetic Creation

In the ‘Preface’ Wordsworth gives a detailed account of the creative process or the process of Poetic Creation. He makes a number of statements at several places about this mysterious activity. Each statement has to be read in its context. Thus, the memorable but the misleading statement that all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling should not be taken too literally. Nothing could be farther from Wordsworth’s mind. Than, to equate poetry with a sudden gush of emotion as Eliot concludes. With due respect to our scholarly critic. Wordsworth theory of poetic creative deserves detailed discussion. We shall quote his theory in full before we pass any judgment on it.

Wordsworth says,

“ Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, it takes its origin from emotions 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.”

It is clear from this definition that for Wordsworth poetry is matter of feeling and imagination. It is generated in the heart and not in the mind. There is spontaneity in the expression of feeling. Wordsworth further clarifies when he says” the clear springs of poetry must flow freely and spontaneously they cannot be made to flow through artificially laid pipes.” This part of the statement has been often misunderstood. For Wordsworth, poetry is not an immediate expression of the emotion. Poetry cannot be written on order or under stress. A good poet always mediates deeply over the emotions. The poetic process begins in a state of calmness. The later part of the definition /statement makes it quite clear that emotion is recollected in tranquillity. The poet is reliving the past experience but with a difference. The present emotion is similar but not identical with the previous emotion. Thought and emotion combine until the spontaneous overflow begins.

According to Wordsworth the creative process involves four stages before the poetic composition takes place. There are four stages in the process of poetic creation. These are observation, recollection, contemplation and imaginative excitement. At the first stage of the poet of all there is perception or observation of some object or character or incident. It sets-up powerful emotion in the mind of the poet. It is followed by recollection in which the memory plays an important role. An interval of time must pass during which the poet’s experience sinks deep into his consciousness.. The next stage is of contemplation. During this stage, the poet’s mind is purged (remove) of all non-essential emotions. Poetry is the essence of the ultimate Reality. The poet’s mind is like a sieve which removes what is accidental and irrational. Consequently, after contemplation there comes the gradual revival of the “emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation.” Thus the poet is once again in Similar emotional excitement to what he experienced when he first saw the object. Wordsworth says that “in this mood successful composition generally begins.”

Herbert read observes.

“Good poetry is never an immediate reaction to the provoking cause”. The poet communicates his experience to the world because he is a man of greater sensibility Wordsworth defines a poet in the following lines”. He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to common among mankind”. However, a poet is not “different in kind from other man, but only in degree”. He has some extra qualities.

Wordsworth himself closely followed his theory of poetic creation in practice. His simple but beautiful poem “Daffodils illustrates this famous statement. The poet happened to see a large number of daffodils flower growing by the side of a lake. The poet’s heart was filled with joy. But, wordsworth did not write the poem on the spur of the moment immediately. Later on, when the poet was in a vacant mood, he composed the poem. The last stanza of the poem sums up the creative process.

“Fort oft on my couch I lie.  
In vacant or in pensive mood  
They flash upon the inward eye  
which is the blurs of solitude.  
Then my heart with pleasure  
and dances with daffodils.”

The poet remembers the emotional experience when he is in solitude. The poet relives the experience through the “inward eye” or the eye of the mind. The poet heart is filled with joy and he communicates this experience to the reader.

Wordsworth description of creative process has been subject of much criticism over the years. In modern times T.S. Eliot has led the condemnation of Wordsworth theory of poetic creation His comments are well known. He says.

“Poetry is not turning loose of

emotion but an escape  
from emotion, It is not an  
expression of personality but  
an escape from personality.”

The criticism of Eliot is wholly negative. Wordsworth is not advocating uncontrolled emotional experience. He does not minimize the role of thought in poetry. The creative process involves intense mental activity. The poet is a man who has “thought long and deeply” Herbert Read Supports Words worth point of view when he says that the poetic of composition has to travel a long distance before it takes its final shape. The poetic creation like all other creative arts is a mystery. It is as mysterious as a birth of the child or the falling of rain or blossoming of a flower. Wordsworth activity and he has succeeded to a large extend.

### Conclusion

Wordsworth is the first critic to turn from the poetry to its substance; builds a theory of poetry, and gives an account of the nature of the creative process. His emphasis is on novelty, experiment, liberty, spontaneity, inspiration and imagination, as contrasted with the classical emphasis on authority, tradition, and restraint. His ‘Preface’ is an unofficial manifesto of the English Romantic Movement giving it a new direction, consciousness and program. After Wordsworth had written, literary criticism could never be the same as before.

Wordsworth through his literary criticism demolishes the old and the faulty and opens out new vistas and avenues. He discards the artificial and restricted forms of approved 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry. Unlike other romantics, Wordsworth also lays stress on the element of thought in poetry. He has a high conception of his own calling and so knows that great poetry cannot be produced by a careless or thoughtless person. He says:

**Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.**

Poetic process is a complex one. Great poetry is not produced on the spur of the moment. It is produced only when the original emotion is contemplated in tranquility, and the poet passions anew.

The credit for democratizing the conception of the poet must go to Wordsworth. According to him, the poet is essentially a man who differs from other men not in kind, but only in degree. He has a more lively sensibility, a more comprehensive soul, greater powers of observation, imagination and communication. He is also a man who has thought long and deep. Words worth emphasizes his organic oneness as also the need for his emotional identification with other men.

We can do no better than conclude this account of the achievement of Wordsworth as a critic with the words of Rene Wellek:

Wordsworth thus holds a position in the history of criticism which must be called ambiguous or transitional. He inherited from neo-classicism a theory of the imitation of nature to which he gives, however, a specific social twist: he inherited from the 18<sup>th</sup> century a view of poetry as passion and emotion which he again modified as.... “recollection in tranquility”. He takes up rhetorical ideas about the effect of poetry but extends and amplifies them into a theory of the social effects of literature... he also adopts a theory of poetry in which imagination holds the central place as a power of unification and ultimate insight into the unity of the world. Though Wordsworth left only a small body of criticism, it is rich in survivals, suggestions, anticipations and personal insights.

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