

An Ecocritical Reading of William Wordsworth's Selected Poems

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Abstract

With the publication of Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's joint collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s and the critics changed their angles of vision and examined the works of art by focusing on the relationship between man and Nature. Hence, Romantic poetry, in general, and William Wordsworth, in particular, became the key icons of ecocritical studies. Wordsworth was a major English Romantic poet who has been considered as a forerunner of English Romanticism. His views towards Nature and man's treatment of Nature have supported his position as an important icon of ecocritical studies. His fame lies in the general belief that he has been viewed as a Nature poet who viewed Nature superior to humans. In other words, his views about Nature and his poems seek to heal the long-forgotten wounds of Nature in the hope of reaching unification between man and Nature. Therefore, this study is an attempt to focus on Wordsworth's selected poems in the light of Ecocriticism in order to shed light on the poet's cautious views about the interdependence of man and Nature and purge Wordsworth of the unjust labels tagged to him as a self-centered poet. Accordingly, this research takes into account the importance of the reciprocal relationship between man and Nature as the major constituents of a vast ecosystem and helps the readers grow ecologically and achieve tranquility in an era suffocated by technological pollution.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, Romanticism, Nature

1. Introduction

Though there are doubts about the beginning of Ecocriticism and Jonathan Bate is often acknowledged for the coming into fruition of Ecocriticism in British Romantic studies in the early 1990s, the movement had started its activity in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s with the help of scholars who analyzed American Nature writing texts with regard to the prevailing ecological and environmental issues and crises. Besides these points, in his *Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell (2005, p. 2) argues that the roots of Ecocriticism precede modern and Romantic backgrounds:

If environmental criticism today is still an emergent discourse it is one with very ancient roots. In one form or another the "idea of nature" has been a dominant or at least residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since these fields came into being.

With the emergence of Ecocriticism as a new critical approach in the 1990s, Romantic poetry, in general, and William Wordsworth, in particular, became the icons of ecocritical studies. What Romantics did was, in fact, creating an "ecological perspective" which Worster (1977, p. 82) defines as, "a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth".

Romantic poetry is the true expression of the nostalgia of human being as a result of man's separation from Nature, or better say, mother Earth (Peck & Coyle, 1984). Romanticism was an artistic, intellectual, and literary Movement that began in Europe by the end of the 18th century as a reaction against the Industrial Revolution, the Age of Enlightenment, and the scientific rationalization of Nature. Romanticism, as the anti-Enlightenment movement, as Bate asserts, looks for "a symbiosis between mind and nature" in order to offer "a challenge within the realms of both political and scientific ecology" (as cited in Coupe, 2000, p. xvii). The most important characteristic of this Movement is the free expression of the feelings of the artist. As a by-product of this intellectual Movement with its emphasis on human imagination, Romantic poetry emerged as a free representation of the artist that sheds light on the nostalgic state of man in the modern world, concentrating on

man's separation from Nature.

The present paper is an effort to provide the reader with an ecological consciousness through an ecocritical study of Wordsworth's selected poetry to prove Bates' saying that "poetry is the place where we save the earth" (2000, p. 283). In line with that, the researchers try to purge Wordsworth of the unjust labels tagged to him as a self-centered poet and will prove that he was the foremost Romantic poet who cared for the creation of symbiosis between man and Nature.

2. Discussion

When we return to the concept of poetry and the usefulness or the uselessness of the poets to the private and public lives of the individuals, originating from Plato and Aristotle's views about poets, one may wonder whether poets and poetry could be of any use in the modern society. At the same time, with the daily advances of technology in the modern society, we witness that modern society is filled with man's fragmented mentality, as a result of modern and postmodern views about life. Though literary critics talked about the ecocritical concepts in the past, it was with the help of Cheryll Glotfelty that Ecocriticism could have a say among other critical approaches, since it, as Rigby claims, "remembers the earth by rendering an account of the indebtedness of culture to nature" (as cited in Wolfreys, 2002, p. 154).

As a recent literary approach Ecocriticism studies "the relationship between literature and physical environment" and answers such questions as, "How is nature represented in this sonnet?, How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world?, In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? etc." (Glotfelty, 1996a, p. xviii). Therefore, with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's joint collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996 and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 critics changed their angels of vision and strived for bringing about a unity between man and Nature with "one foot in literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty, 1996a, p. xix). Since all Romantic poets, in one way or another, have tried to conserve Nature and create a concordant relationship between man and Nature, ecocritical studies are, as Hutchings (2007, p. 174) avers, "motivated by a sense of political urgency associated with the desire to investigate and remedy current environmental problems" through their careful analysis of the Romantic texts as the major sources of ecological inspiration.

William Wordsworth, born in 1770, was a major English Romantic poet who is considered as a forerunner of English Romanticism. He was Britain's poet laureate from 1843 until his death in 1850. His contributions to the repository of English literature are undoubtedly a token of his greatness among his contemporaries. His views towards Nature and man's treatment of Nature have supported his position as an important icon of ecocritical studies. His fame lies in the general belief that he has been viewed as England's greatest Nature poet who viewed Nature superior to human being whose survival is dependent upon Nature. In his influential book, *Romantic Ideology*, Bate (1991, p. 57) proclaims that Romantics were "the first ecologists" due to their challenging and countering "the ideology of capital" and originating a "holistic vision" of Nature. In his *Green Writing*, McKusick (2000, p. 19) contends that "English Romantics were the first full-fledged ecocritical writers in the Western literary tradition" in that they shared a holistic view of Nature and called for the arrival of an amicable relation between human beings and Nature. Wordsworth's emphasis on human being's dependence on Nature for survival is clearly shown in *The Ruined Cottage* (1797-ca. 1799), wherein he says:

At length [towards] the [Cottage I returned]
Fondly, and traced with milder interest
That secret spirit of humanity
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings, still survived. (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1367, lines 501-506)

Wordsworth's being famous as a poet of Nature is a key point that proves his ecological and environmental concerns. McKusick (2000, p. 5) maintains that Wordsworth was not only one of the "founders of English Romanticism", but had a "vital influence" on and "contributed to the fundamental ideas and core values of the modern environmental movement" (p. 11). His withdrawal to his mother land, Lake District, and doing away with the tumultuous life of the technological society of the Enlightenment age play such an important role in his being known as an "ecological critic of the Enlightenment" (p. 139). R. Pite believes, "Wordsworth's sense of nature arises out of and depicts a particular group of places with which he feels himself irremovably bound up"

(as cited in Gill, 2006, p. 188). In *Romantic Ecology*, Bate (1991, p. 19) proves that Wordsworth's interest in the non-human, i.e., Nature, is a "conservative ideology" which is a quest for "a harmonious relationship with nature". As a matter of fact, an ecocritical reading of Wordsworth, as a "worshipper of Nature" (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1339, line 152), and his poetry is, as K. Rigby argues, "a form of advocacy for an other, which is felt to be unable to speak for itself" (as cited in Wolfreys, 2002, p. 165).

In contrast to this belief, several ecocritics reject Wordsworth as an ecological thinker and believe that he values human imagination more than Nature and has an objectified view towards Nature. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth's aim in granting superiority to Nature was an effort to broaden human beings ecological horizons and show that Romantic view of Nature was "a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth" (Worster, 1977, p. 82). As a product of Romanticism, Wordsworth believed that human's feelings and emotions played an important role in the artistic productions of the artists. Wordsworth defines poetry as, "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility" (as cited in Abjadian, 2011, p. 221).

Artistic imagination was a key element that helped the artist to express his pure feelings and emotions. From this point emerge the opposing views of the critics. Some believe that Wordsworth's emphasis on human imagination relates him to anthropocentrism, which places human being above nonhuman. On the other hand, other critics maintain that what Wordsworth does is creating a mutual relationship between man and Nature, i.e., symbiosis, in a sense, rejecting any hierarchy. The Yale School critics give priority to the concepts of imagination and the transcendence of human mind. But, contrary to some critics' views, this does not mean that imagination is at odds with the external Nature. In *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (1987), Geoffrey H. Hartman declares that it is "nature itself [that leads Wordsworth] beyond nature" (as cited in Ho, 2002, p. 1). He takes "the Simplon Pass" passage of Book six of *The Prelude* into account to reach the fact that "nature's 'end' is to lead to something 'without end,' to teach the travellers to transcend nature" (as cited in Ho, 2002, p. 2). Another Yale critic, H. Bloom, identifies Wordsworth as a poet of imagination not of Nature. In *The Visionary Company*, Bloom (1971) suggests that the theme of Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* is "the nature of poet's imagination and ... imagination's relation to external Nature" (as cited in Ho, 2002, p. 1). It is, therefore, this emphasis on the imaginative mind that the New Historicists set themselves against.

In contrast to Yale critics, some New Historicist critics tend to focus on the Romantics' stress on human imagination to counter their celebration of Nature and demonstrate that Romantics transcended human mind and imagination above Nature. The New Historicists are in the habit of reading texts under the influence of Marxism; in so doing, they turn to "history" and "ideology": "The 1980s witnessed something of a return to history, a move away from ahistorical formalisms, among practitioners of literary criticism" (Bate, 1991, p. 2). In *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, Liu (1989) reproaches Wordsworth for his distorting and neglecting the social and political issues of his decade. He takes "The Simplon Pass" passage in Book six of *The Prelude* into consideration to assert, "[in] a Wordsworthian tour, the arrow of signification from historical ornament toward the background is curiously blunted: historical markers point nowhere and decorate nature for no purpose" (as cited in Ho, 2002, p. 2). Similarly, he rebukes Wordsworth for his overlooking history and putting emphasis on Nature by declaring, "[without] history in the background, a landscape, after all, is not a landscape; it is wilderness" (as cited in Ho, 2002, pp. 2-3).

Jerome J. McGann criticizes Wordsworth from a socio-historical point of view and asserts that Romantics render their ideas by "extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization", which leads them to describe "idealized localities" (as cited in Ho, 2002, p. 3). In the opinion of McGann, poetry is the aftermath of the social, historical, and political events and should take such points into consideration. As a result, he admonishes Wordsworth's "finding consolation in nature" rather than "attending to economic conditions" (Bate, 1991, p. 15). For such and such critics, Wordsworth's stress on the role of imagination is considered as "a kind of compensation for his political disillusionment or even apostasy" (p. 3).

As one of the foremost ecocritics and a major advocate of Wordsworth as a true poet of Nature, Bate (1991, p. 8) criticizes McGann for his ignoring "the transcendent imagination", to concentrate on the issues related to "history" and "society". By the same token, he rejects Geoffrey Hartman's criticism of Wordsworth due to his turning his back on "the transcendent imagination". He encapsulates the principles of the afore-mentioned literary schools in the following terms:

The 1960s gave us an idealist reading of Romanticism which was implicitly bourgeois in its privileging of the individual imagination; the 1980s gave us a post-Althusserian Marxist critique of Romanticism.

The first of these readings assumed that the human mind is superior to nature; the second assumed that the economy of human society is more important than the “the economy of nature”. (p. 9)

Hence, Bate (1991, p. 9) believes, “The time is now right to allow Wordsworth to become once more what he imagined himself to be, what Shelley called him, and what he was to the Victorians: ‘Poet of Nature’”.

As for the purpose of this research paper, reference will be made to two major groups of critics. The first group includes Bate (1991), Kroeber (1994), and McKusick (2000) as those critics who support Wordsworth’s ecological position and the second one consists of Hartman (1970), McGann (1983), and Simpson (1987) who reject Wordsworth’s ecological stand as a mediator between human being and Nature.

In order to provide readers with a short background information, it would be helpful to start from Bate (1991, p. 40) as a true follower of Wordsworth, who in his *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Imagination* maintains, “The ‘Romantic Ecology’ reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things”. As an ecocritic, Bate does not intend to draw a line between the “material world” and the natural one. The new mentality that Romantic poets spoke of is what Bate explains as, “a respect for the earth and a scepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society” (p. 9). Wordsworth’s sonnet, “The World Is Too Much with Us”, written in 1802, can be a good justification for Bate’s argument wherein the speaker says:

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! (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1394, lines 1-4)

Wordsworth is upset with the modern man’s neglectful treatment of Nature and shows that the punishment of him/her is the unification of the natural elements from which man is banished; “For this, for everything, we are out of tune; / It moves us not ...” (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1394, lines 8-9).

In line with Bate, McKusick (2000, p. 56), makes a similar argument, that Wordsworth’s poetry neither objectifies Nature, which makes it “touristic detachment”, nor advocates the Cartesian mind/body dualism that creates “despotism of the eye”. He does not believe that Wordsworth’s poetry is a detachment from an imperial approach to the natural world which ends in the destruction of Nature. Rather, he holds that Wordsworth increases the ecological consciousness of the human being by emphasizing his/her reliance on Nature for survival. He believes that in “Expostulation and Reply” (1798, p. 59) Wordsworth attacks “the objectivity of our conventional ways of knowing”, doubting about the possibility of a “conversation” between man and the natural objects in the world, where the speaker of the poem says:

“The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where’er they be,
Against or with our will.

...

—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone,

And dream my time away.” (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1334, lines 17-20, 29-32)

The above-mentioned lines highlight Wordsworth’s emphasis on the existence of a spiritual and mental distance between human beings and their environment, which stem from anthropocentric views about Nature. In fact, anthropocentrism originates from the three views that grant superiority to human being over Nature and underestimates human’s respect for Nature. Respecting Nature is possible when there is no belief in human superiority over Nature, traces of which can be seen in the three beliefs that grant superiority to human beings: first, the classical Greek humanism which grants superiority to human beings over animals because of their rationality; secondly, the Cartesian mind/body dualism which maintains that human beings, on the account of possessing souls, are superior to animals; and finally, the Judeo-Christian notion of creation as a “Great Chain of Being”, which views human beings superior to animals and plants due to the hierarchal concept that God has given man a superior position in the “Great Chain of Being”. So, biospheric egalitarianism rejects all these

concepts and asks for man's respectful treatment of Nature (Pratt, Hawarth, & Brady, 2000).

What links Bate, McKusick, and Kroeber together is their belief in the significant role of the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, in the ecological awakening of human beings. Kroeber supports Bate's viewpoint, "Wordsworth remains the founding father for a thinking of poetry in relation to place, to our dwelling upon the earth" (Bate, 2000, p. 205), by asserting that Romantic poets were the first "proto-ecological" thinkers (as cited in Li-Shu, p. 126), who have tried to bridge the gaps between human beings and Nature and reestablish the broken bond. A good example of the emphasis on the interconnectedness of human being and Nature is Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring" (1798). Wordsworth places the speaker in the middle of Nature and shows that Nature is right and loyal to human being in its turn and it is man who should take the blame for the broken bond between him/her and Nature:

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

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

...

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament

What man has made of man? (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1333, lines 1-8, 21-24)

Elsewhere, in *The Ruined Cottage*, there is a reference to Nature's bestowing her favors upon man despite man's disrespectful treatment of her [Nature] and his/her disturbing the ecosystem:

... Beside yon spring I stood
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
One sadness, they and I. For them a bond
Of brotherhood is broken: time has been
When every day the touch of human hand
Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered
To human comfort ... (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1359, lines 82-88)

These lines can support Wordsworth's ecological position as a poet of Nature and serve as a justification for the union of the above-mentioned critics who rely on Wordsworth's contributions to the rise of the ecological awareness of human beings. As a whole, the views of the aforementioned critics highlight Joseph W. Meeker's comic spirit as, "comedy illustrates that survival depends upon man's ability to change himself rather than his environment and upon his ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting him" (as cited in Glotfelty, 1996, pp. 168-169).

In opposition to such standpoints, Hartman (1970) in "The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way" focuses on the role of artistic imagination in the process of composition of a work of art to argue that for Wordsworth Nature is "only a means, through which the individual mind, the Imagination, could transcend the material world" (as cited in Li-Shu, p. 128). He is, actually, focusing on the supremacy of man over Nature. Much to the reader's surprise, elsewhere he reminds us that Nature, for Wordsworth, serves as "a presence and a power" and believes that the poet's "sense of mission" was to protect the earth because human imagination needs to coexist physically and intellectually with it (as cited in Li-Shu, p. 128). Hartman is not able to prove to the reader that Wordsworth valued human imagination more than Nature, since he notes 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"

(as cited in Li-Shu, p. 128).

Where McGann accuses Wordsworth's losing of the natural world to achieve a higher spiritual plane, Bate hits back by saying, "I propose that the Romantic Ideology is not, as Jerome McGann has it, a theory of imagination ... but a theory of ecosystems" (1991, p. 10). Moreover, McGann labels Wordsworth's finding consolation in Nature as "an escape from socio-political" reality. In opposition to that Bate, once more, defends Wordsworth through his emphasis upon the interconnectedness of the human being and Nature by claiming that "Humanity only survives in nature" (1991, p. 22).

Last but not least, David Simpson focuses on "egotistical sublime", coined by John Keats, to say that the focal point in Wordsworth's poetry is "himself, his own ego" (as cited in Li-Shu, p. 128). To Keats, "the poet is the most unpoetical of all God's creatures" (as cited in Ramazani, 2011, p. 328). Actually, Simpson is referring to Keats to show that Wordsworth's poetry is self-centered and does not go beyond the self of the poet. In opposition to this opinion, Alan Liu posits that "even 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" (as cited in Li-Shu, p. 128). This claim can be justified by referring to the opening lines of *Michael: A Pastoral Poem* (1800) where the speaker states:

And hence this Tale, while I was yet a Boy
Careless of books, yet having felt the power
Of Nature, by the gentle agency
Of natural objects, led me on to feel
For passions that were not my own, and think
(At random and imperfectly indeed)

On man, the heart of man, and human life. (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1369, lines 27-33)

Since the main objective of this paper has been to increase the ecological awareness of many readers of Wordsworth, who believe that Wordsworth takes an anthropocentric position in his poetry and grants a higher position to human being in contrast to Nature, his great poem "The Tables Turned" (1798) is a strong response in support of Wordsworth as a believer in the great power of Nature to educate human mind. In fact, in this poem, the speaker is rejecting all human knowledge gained through reading books:

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

...

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!

He, too, is no mean preacher:

Come forth into the light of things,

Let Nature be your Teacher. (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1335, lines 1-4, 9-16)

In addition to that, he goes on to say that Nature is the ultimate source of wealth, health, cheerfulness, etc. and is ready to bestow them on man if only man returns to his/her forgotten mother, Nature, so much so that:

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

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
 Our meddling intellect
 Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
 We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;
 Close up those barren leaves;
 Come forth, and bring with you a heart
 That watches and receives. (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1335, lines 21-32)

Although Wordsworth respects our imagination, he criticizes “Our meddling intellect” and the destruction it causes; the speaker wants the reader to “Come forth and bring with you a heart / That watches and receives” (Wordsworth, 2006, p. 1335, lines 31-32).

3. Conclusion

Wordsworth’s “proto-ecological” poems provide the modern man, who lives in a world haunted by fragmentations and illusory shadows of reality and technology, with a new lens through which he/she can witness the interconnectedness and interdependence of man and Nature in a vast ecosystem. Wordsworth’s main aim in celebrating Nature has been a call to remind the people of the notion of “biocentrism” which S. Campbell defines as, “the conviction that humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures ... but simply equal to everything else in the natural world” (as cited in Glotfelty, 1996, p. 128). Wordsworth’s views towards Nature and the interdependence of human being and Nature are the justification for his greatness among his contemporaries as a true Nature poet who engendered a new way of seeing, appreciating, and living in harmony with Nature, though, as Williams (1978) argues, “we are both a part and apart from nature” (p. 33). The fact that Wordsworth is a dominant figure in the subject of ecocritical studies in an era suffocated by technological advances, absorbs the reader’s attention to his poetry as an embodiment of ecological studies in that his poetry “foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its holistic conception of the Earth as a house-hold, a dwelling place for an interdependent biological community” (Williams, 1978, p. 50). To put it in a nutshell, Wordsworth’s poetry is a call to reconnect human being and Nature and to remind man of his/her reliance on Nature for survival. As a result, Wordsworth intends to show the value of survival of human being in Nature in the way that Bate remarks, “the survival of humanity comes with nature’s mastery over the edifices of civilization” (1991, p. 34). And this claim is echoed in Hopkin’s (1918, pp. 13-16) stanza:

What would the world be, once bereft
 Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,
 O let them be left, wilderness and wet;
 Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

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