

# Wordsworth against the Capitalist Ideology of Labor in “The Last of the Flock” and “Simon Lee”

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## Abstract

In several places in the *Lyrical Ballads* William Wordsworth challenges the capitalist ideology of labor. In Wordsworth's view one of the key weaknesses the way this ideology manifests itself in economic thought is the way it generalizes about different people and their situations. The result of such generalizations is that they miss out the different meanings people give to their economic activity and applies to them a crude classification of either rational or irrational. Wordsworth believed that this erroneous economic thinking had infected moral theory. In the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth investigates specific instances of people for whom capitalist economic imperatives no longer make sense. The implication of these instances is that these people are being marginalized by their failure to be assimilated to alienated labor. They either fail to adapt to alienated labor or adapt to it for motives other than those prescribed by the capitalist ideology of labor. This article will show how “The Last of the Flock” gives an instance of the former kind and “Simon Lee” gives an instance of the latter. In the *Lyrical Ballads* morality critiques economic thought. Wordsworth uses poetry to reaffirm the authority of moral thought to inform economic thought. This is an act of rebellion against the tendency he saw in his times of economic thought to stand above moral thought.

**Keywords:** Wordsworth, capitalism, ideology, labor, alienation, *Lyrical Ballads*

## 1. Introduction

The capitalist ideology of labor involves a number of closely related ideas in economic thought. This article will draw on insights from two poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* to outline William Wordsworth's counter examples to some of these ideas. A very common idea of modern labor is that people work to live and not live to work. “The Last of the Flock” and “Simon Lee, the old Huntsman” are both counterexamples to this idea that make their cases in different ways. In “The Last of the Flock” the man is torn by the feeling that he values his sheep and the labor he has put into raising them above the survival of his family. In “Simon Lee: the old Huntsman” Simon is depicted as living for his work in his youth as a hunter—he has no interest in life apart from this work—and living for his work in old age in order to distract himself from the misery of his lost youth. Both cases conflict with the ideology of labor because they involve attitudes to labor that are driven by the same economic imperatives that mobilized the kind of labor that was displacing them but at the same time cannot be reconciled with the attitudes that motivated modern labor. The sheep farmer and Simon Lee's attitudes to their labors are not simply anachronistic because they change to adapt to the new circumstances. But the changes they embody can also not be assimilated by modern economic changes and so both are marginalized by society. Both poems trace a shift from non-alienated to alienated labor in the lives of their protagonists and society at large. The growing domination of alienated labor in society effectively marginalizes the sheep farmer and Simon Lee. Wordsworth's poems are an attempt to use literature to ennoble and preserve them and their attitudes to labor.

There has already been much research done into Wordsworth's views on changes in the economy. Perhaps the most extended discussion of this topic is found in Philip Connell's *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of “Culture”* (Connell, 2005). He has argued that it is not quite right to think of Wordsworth as directly opposed to capitalist economic thinking. He has shown that it is overly simplistic to see Wordsworth's objection to economic theory as merely taking the form that economic theory has an influence too broad beyond its proper domain. This article agrees with the thrust of Connell's argument. The criticism of economic thought in Wordsworth here discussed is qualified in the sense that it sees in economic theory the trappings of an emerging

ideology of labor that Wordsworth opposed. In lamenting the rise of this ideology I do not see Wordsworth as necessarily making the point that economic theory has only the right to discuss its own categories. The ideas of all different subjects naturally intermingle and this is an idea Wordsworth alludes to when he asserts the unity of language in the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth, 2005, p. 9). Simon Jarvis has discussed Wordsworth's criticism of economistic thinking in "The Last of the Flock" in *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Jarvis, 2007, pp. 85-88). But whereas he talks about the poem in reference to economic thinking's classifications of rational needs and wants this article will look at the poem in terms of the capitalist ideology of labor and alienation—there are significant crossovers between Jarvis' interpretation of the poem and the one given here. Perhaps the most famous account of Wordsworth's poetry in regards to economic and social change is that of the New Historicists. Spearheaded by Marjorie Levinson's interpretation of the Romantics, New Historicists see in Wordsworth a reactionary and dishonest poet who tries to ignore social changes or seeks pseudo-harmonies to transcend social strife in his works. On Levinson's account, as a Romantic poet Wordsworth is a conservative apologist for ruling class ideology. While she does not deny that Wordsworth disparages the changes of the mode of production brought about by the industrial revolution she argues that he deploys his poetry to achieve a phony resolution to social conflicts that arose along with economic developments through an evasive turn to nature (Levinson, 1986). The "nature worship" of the Romantics is thought by her to be a kind of escapism from social change that indirectly supports the capitalist ideology of labor. It takes us too far away from the topic of this article to address all of Levinson's arguments. Suffice it to say that this author agrees with Sung-Joong Kim that Levinson has misappropriated the philosophy of Adorno in her case against the Romantics and that strong Adornian cases can be *against* New Historicism in general and *for* the indirect way that Wordsworth's poetry actually challenges the ruling ideology of his day (Kim, 2004). This article will also indirectly refute Levinson by pointing out the numerous ways that two poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* far from seeking a way of avoiding discussion of social change, in fact directly address the capitalist ideology of labor in a way that does not simply embody a reactionary or conservative political agenda. Stuart Allen has talked about Wordsworth's 1802 letter to Charles James Fox, written the same year as the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he decries arbitrary government policy, which "subsumes individuals beneath the general category of 'the lower orders'". Once rendered an abstraction, "the lower orders" are then manipulated in ways that both damage individuals and society." (Allen, 2010, p.78). This tendency to generalization in economic thought is shown here to cross over into government policy. Wordsworth wrote his poems in part as a way of focusing attention onto the individuals that the abstractions of economistic thinking missed out. It is very interesting to note that Wordsworth attached a complimentary copy of the *Lyrical Ballads* to his letter to Fox in his belief that poems therein were an aesthetic way of challenging the ideology of labor. He wanted to influence a politician with his poems in such a way as to make a case for the victims of industrialization. This is the last time this article will mention Levinson: It is worth saying that this is a basic historical fact that Levinson seems to ignore in her argument that Wordsworth's poems turn away from social-political strife.

## 2. Work as a Burden or Sacrifice

### 2.1 The Ideology of Work as a Burden

The view that economically necessary work has no worth beyond survival, that people work in order to afford themselves or others the leisure time and comforts that come with real living is implicit in most of the thought of traditional western philosophers on the subject. Plato and Aristotle assert that the fullest human life is led in the freedom of rational contemplation, free from the burden of labor, which they regard as a lower activity necessary for the satisfaction of baser needs. Kant also saw humans as essentially rational beings whose material nature was a merely animal aspect. This idea is also common in certain schools of thought in Christianity, which treats work as a "curse", punishment for our "fallen" nature. In Wordsworth's day this kind of thinking was translated by the utilitarianism that characterized classical economics into the view that work is an undesired compromise that men make in order to enjoy its fruits. In classical economics humans are seen as essentially driven by their desire to consume and while they live in and for their consumption, they can only do this by paying the price of not fully living during the time they are at work. A life of ease in which there is no production but only consumption is thus seen as an objective for all that only the lucky rich can enjoy (see Anthony, 1978). This view gained particular urgency in the eighteenth century where the increasing specialization of the division of labor, particularly in manufacturing, saw the rise of monotonous and repetitive work. Adam Smith saw this kind of work as degenerating those who were forced to carry it out.

The understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are...very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients

for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. (Smith, 1900, p. 613)

This created a greater need for leisure time from work than had previously existed.

## 2.2 *The Preface and Wordsworth's Attitude to Rural Life.*

Wordsworth challenges the idea of work as a burden in the *Lyrical Ballads*. In the Preface Wordsworth alludes to Adam Smith's idea of degeneration through drudgery in reference to city life:

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (Wordsworth, 2005, p. 6).

The rural choice of setting for the *Lyrical Ballads* was partly to counteract the "uniformity" of the working day of life in the cities. Far from degrading them, the life of those who work the land is lauded as truer and purer:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions (Wordsworth, 2005, pp. 3-4).

Wordsworth denies that labor is necessarily degrading. The life of the "rustic poor" was a life of hard work and yet it afforded those who lead it a greater sincerity of emotion and expression than the life of idle consumers. It seems that it was enriching precisely insofar as it involved a certain kind of toil.

It is important to return to the point Smith was making about repetitive labor for it obviously does not apply to the many varied activities that made up the working day of those working in agriculture at the time of Wordsworth's writing. While Wordsworth talks of the life of the "rustic poor" as enriching those who lead it Smith is simply not talking about this working life. He is talking about the manufacturing jobs, like working in a cotton mill, that were a new and rapidly expanding sector of the economy at his time of writing. It is fair to say that in the passage above where Wordsworth is complaining about city life he is complaining about *these* sorts of occupations that he agreed with Smith were degrading. However, Smith supported the tendency of this kind of degrading occupation to multiply because he saw that it allowed for an increase in national consumption, which it was said in 2.1 was considered by Smith to be the purpose and meaning of labor. This compromise is worthwhile to Smith because it leads to an increase in material wealth, to the more abundant provision of "the necessities and conveniences of life" (Smith, 1900, p. 104). Karl Marx criticized Smith in these terms:

In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou labour! was Jehovah's curse on Adam. And this is labour for Smith, a curse. "Tranquillity" appears as the adequate state, as identical with "freedom" and "happiness". It seems quite far from Smith's mind that the individual, "in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility", also needs a normal portion of work, and of the suspension of tranquillity. Certainly, labour obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to be attained and the obstacles to be overcome in attaining it. But Smith has no inkling whatever that this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity—and that, further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits—hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour. (Marx, 1873, p. 611)

In Marx's terms Smith was advocating the expansion of a kind of labor which is essentially alienated. There are many senses in which it can be said to be alienated but the most interesting sense for this article is in the sense that the labor is alienated from the workers who engage in it because it is done solely for the sake of some

consumption *external* to the production itself. Usually the products of manufacturing labor are not even consumed by its workers but must instead be exchanged for money from customers, which allows the capitalist to pay the workers no more than the cost of their labor power—that is, the consumption of necessities, little more than necessities, for the workers' survival. The only remedy that Smith proposed for the compromise of degrading labor for increased consumption (for somebody, not even its workers) was his vague allusions to the idea of "education" that Marx mocked Smith for only recommending in "homeopathic doses" (Marx, 1961, p. 362). Wordsworth, like Marx, sees in some kinds of labor a meaning and purpose in itself—that is, the idea that labor does not have to be alienating, cases where people invest their life and love *into* their labor and not for the sake of the consumption that it affords. Wordsworth saw instances of this kind of labor in the countryside. (Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Wordsworth saw in some *individual people* cases where those people have found a special meaning in their work. Such work is not for everyone. Simon Lee, for example, is a man who was lucky enough in his youth to have found a niche for himself.) Smith and other prominent representatives of capitalist ideology in economic, political and social thought advocated the expansion of the alienating labor of the cities into the countryside. This was happening at great pace when Wordsworth was writing the *Lyrical Ballads* and in his observations of countryside people he could witness the death of an agricultural way of life referred to in the two poems of this article. In "The Last of the Flock" and "Simon Lee" Wordsworth documents the push of capitalist alienated labor into the countryside and bemoans the loss of the kinds of labor and attitudes to them that capitalist alienated labor was in the process of displacing. Smith and Wordsworth are talking about different kinds of labor. While Smith supported the encroachment of capitalist alienated labor into areas of non-alienated labor (or at least, labor that was not alienated *in that way*) into the countryside and celebrated its supplanting traditional agriculture, Wordsworth sees something to mourn in this. In the two poems of this article Wordsworth is critical of the cruelty that accompanies the rise of alienated labor and the blinkeredness of its ideological props personified here by Smith's enthusiastic support of the compromise of degrading labor for greater consumption. The characters of the poems this article discusses cannot be reconciled to this ideology. They are marginalized by society because of it but Wordsworth finds in them something worthy of admiration and respect.

### 3. "The Last of the Flock": Work Giving Life Meaning

"The Last of the Flock" gives an anecdote of a man who sees in his labor the meaning of his life. It tells of a time when the narrator encounters a man holding a lamb and crying by the side of the road. Upon request the man retells his story. He was a sheep farmer whose stock of sheep rapidly increased, and as it grew the farmer raised a family. Unfortunately the profits from his sheep could not keep up with the growth of his family "Six children, Sir! Had I to feed," (p. 21), and when hard times struck the farmer was forced to sell off his sheep one by one to feed them.

I sold a sheep as they had said,  
And bought my little children bread,  
And they were healthy with their food;  
For me it never did me good.  
A woeful time it was for me,  
To see the end of all my gains,  
The pretty flock which I had reared  
With all my care and pains,  
To see it melt like snow away!  
For me it was a woeful day (Wordsworth, 2005, p. 21).

This could be read as a straightforward sad story of loss. The sheep are a surplus that must be sacrificed in order for their owner to tend to the necessities of his family's survival. But the farmer explains what all the "care and pains" (p. 21) of his sheep meant to him.

Sir! 't was a precious flock to me,  
As dear as my own children be;  
For daily with my growing store  
I loved my children more and more.

Alas! it was an evil time;  
God cursed me in my sore distress,  
I prayed, yet every day I thought  
I loved my children less;  
And every week, and every day,  
My flock, it seemed to melt away. (p. 21).

Here the farmer makes the shocking confession that far from being mere stock, a means to feed his family, the sheep have become as dear to him as his own family. His love for his family seems to be directly proportionate to the prosperity of his flock. The farmer has thus not worked on his flock solely to feed his family. He has invested meaning into his toil. Jarvis notes that “the farmer’s love for his sheep and his material interest in their life have become entangled in a way which cannot simply be undone when the base starts going down” (Jarvis, 2007, p. 86). It is not obvious what financial hardship hit the farmer. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries great changes in the wool trade were taking place such that different markets were developing for different wools. Prices for different wools fluctuated during the industrial revolution. It could be that this farmer’s sheep were producing a kind of wool that suffered from a fall in demand. With so many children the farmer could have been caught in a trap if the wool prices fell by just a little bit. This farmer’s flock was not large enough to sustain his family. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries small farmers were progressively dispossessed of their holdings by larger landowners who could survive price fluctuations through economies of scale. This poem tells the tale of one such small-scale farmer. Having sold one sheep to feed his family his stock of sheep and wool declined and if prices did not rise again or did not rise fast enough he would not be able to earn enough from the remaining sheep and so on until they were all gone. The farmer has sacrificed his sheep for the survival of his family but the emotional distress this involves has forced him to confess: “And now I care not if we die, / And perish all of poverty.” (Wordsworth, 2005, p. 20). Feeding his children is no comfort to him: “And they were healthy with their food; / For me it never did me good.” (p. 21). There is no way of rationalising this attitude to one’s labor and its fruits according to ideas of working to live. Perhaps the farmer’s expression can be dismissed as exaggeration here but the idea is returned to in another bizarre confession; in seeing his flock gradually dwindle the farmer exclaims: “I wished they all were gone” (p. 21). He would rather have nothing than watch his flock slowly die. The capitalist ideology of work cannot accommodate such a thought of one’s property except in terms of temporary insanity. Yet the farmer’s plight is the paradoxical result of trying to raise a family. He was living off the proceeds from his flock of sheep before hard times struck. This counterexample throws the capitalist ideology’s model of work into doubt because it seems to arise precisely through the farmer’s initial drive to meet its imperatives.

#### 4. “Simon Lee”: Work as Play and Work as Distraction from Trauma

“Simon Lee: the old Huntsman” depicts a man in two occupations in youth and age and two different, opposed attitudes he has to each. In his youth Simon Lee was a huntsman. It seems he excelled in this vocation “He all the country could outrun, / Could leave both man and horse behind” (Wordsworth, 2005, p. 40). He lived for the hunt. “When, he was young he little knew / Of husbandry or tillage;” (p. 40) Although Simon obviously lived off of this job there can be little doubt from the poem that he enjoyed his work at the expense of concentrating on the economic imperatives that drove his neighbours. Simon loved this occupation. Even in old age when his hunting days are long behind him the narrator tells the reader “And still there’s something in the world / At which his heart rejoices; / For when the chiming hounds are out, / He dearly loves their voices!” (p. 40). Simon’s occupation as a huntsman was exciting and energetic. Simon put so much energy into his work that: “And often, ere the chase was done, / He reeled, and was stone-blind”. (p. 40). However, this job was not done for the sake of consumption. As a huntsman Simon is not making a sacrifice of his time in order to enjoy consumption because his work is a kind of play. Indeed, I could go as far as to say that for Simon his consumption was only for his work. Simon would eat just so he could feed himself to give himself energy for the hunt. By the late eighteenth century the hunt had become a highly ritualised formality that was seen mainly as a kind of entertainment for the aristocracy. It was not a necessary means for securing food, which was mainly farmed, or means of killing pests, whose numbers had already been severely curtailed by developments in techniques of organised livestock husbandry including traps, barns and fences. So the capitalist ideology of work would not really characterise Simon’s job as work at all. Yet this work did pay to feed Simon. It also arguably performed an important function in the local community. The poem tells how Simon was well known “four counties round” (p. 40). Simon brought happiness to those around him.

The poem "Simon Lee" is a form of "elegy" (Griffin, 1977, p. 404) The Master of the Hall of Ivor, for whom Simon worked is dead. A symbolic meaning can be attributed to the Master's death in that it can be thought of as symbolising the death of a way of life. For with him the hunt has also ended. Simon Lee can be read as a kind of elegy not only of Simon himself, for he has lost the work that gave his life meaning, but also the way of life of his local community. The changes brought about by the industrial revolution can be seen as partly responsible for the death of the Hall of Ivor. A new class of businessmen had arisen. They were modernising agriculture and uprooting landless peasants to work in their new factories. In this climate feudal entertainments were gradually being side lined. City entertainments would replace the hunt. Wordsworth indirectly uses "Simon Lee" to lament the loss of a way of life that capitalism's rationalisation of labor had brought about.

The changes in the labor market could not accommodate Simon's hunting job or his attitude towards it but that is because the type of labor that it could comprehend had displaced Simon's job. That is, Simon's job became anachronistic after a new form of labor and a new attitude to rational labor that came with it, had taken its place. In these new circumstances Simon is forced to bow to the dictates of capitalist economic rationality. Simon's obsession with the hunt comes at a cost. For in later life the manor house where he worked as a huntsman closes down and, having made no preparations for retirement, Simon is driven to a life of tillage as a farmer "the poorest of the poor" (p. 40). Wordsworth's narrator directly questions the rationality of this new job and Simon's motives. The poem tells of Simon's many infirmities in old age, his poverty, his lack of progeny and his growing dependence upon his wife in tasks requiring physical exertion because she is now stronger than him. He can hardly work his tiny "scrap of land" (p. 41) anymore. Simon's growing decrepitude means he can no longer work the entirety of what meagre land he has. This causes the narrator to ask: "But what to them avails the land / Which he can till no longer?" (p. 41) Even survival itself is not a good enough reason for Simon to keep working his land. Simon's work cannot save him or his wife. It can't even delay his inevitable death which Simon admits cannot be far away: "Few months of life has he in store / As he to you will tell, / For still, the more he works, the more / Do his weak ankles swell." (p. 41) It seems Simon's efforts are futile. And yet Simon works very hard. The capitalist ideology of labor has it that the need to survive is always the primary drive in life but Simon's case is one where even if he does all he can it cannot be enough. When people reach the end of their natural lifespans and see their mortality drawing nearer the capitalist ideology of labor can give no justification for their continued work. Yet Simon seems to depend upon his work for something. The narrator says: "And, though you with your utmost skill / From labour could not wean them," (p. 41). Simon has become dependent upon his work in the same way that a baby is dependent upon its milk even though work cannot yield enough to sustain him. Why does Simon need his work? Simon from youth has been a man of action so continuing to labor, even fruitlessly is one way for him to maintain his identity as an active, vigorous man. That is, work seems to confer on Simon a kind of link to his past. But it is a false link for we have seen that in his youth Simon never had any appetite for the kind of situation he finds himself in when he is old. The narrator recounts an anecdote in which he helped Simon hew the root of a tree on his tiny plot of land. The narrator notes that when Simon was trying to do it himself it seemed as if it would take him "forever" (p. 41). On the other hand it only took the narrator one swing of the axe to do the job. Simon cried. Griffin sees in these tears the fragility of a man who is "embarrassingly grateful to anyone 'concerned' enough to help" (Griffin, 1977, p. 397). Jones gives the more nuanced interpretation that the meaning of Simon's tears is impossible to correctly interpret because there is not enough information given in the poem (Jones, 1991, p. 587). But he suggests that it is just as likely to see in Simon's tears not simple gratitude but frustration and rage that his ineptitude has been exposed by the relative ease with which the narrator accomplished the task (p. 586). What is undeniable is that Simon's tears expose his weakness. He needs his work even though he can't do it anymore and when someone helps him he breaks down. This suggests that Simon was using his work as a distraction from the acknowledgement of the loss of his former times. Work is thus not a necessity for survival, Simon no longer has the means of survival. Work has become for Simon a kind of prop, ennobling toil that hides his grief. There is no place for such sentimentality in the new labor that was dispossessing people like Simon. Yet when it is gone, when Simon loses his first occupation and then fails in the second, the narrator is moved to mourn its passing. Simon's work is worthy of commemoration even if it is obsolete.

## 5. Conclusion

Wordsworth has indirectly criticised the capitalist ideology of labor in different ways in the two poems this article has studied. In "The Last of the Flock" Wordsworth's criticism of the ideology of labor is internal to it. It is internal in that it implies that people can become absorbed by their labors to the extent that it is impossible for them to distinguish needs from wants. Indeed, the whole logic of the distinction is directly questioned by the farmer who can see no point in life once he has lost his occupation. "Simon Lee" makes a different criticism. It

implies that the new ideology of labor is a product of historical phenomena that were only emerging from the labor it replaced. We can thus use the values of a previous time, the time of huntsmen, to question the values of the economic era that replaced it. The other way is to simply note that Simon Lee is praised by the poem. He is honored with an elegy. If there is no place the capitalist ideology of labor for simple and hard working people like Simon, then it seems it is blinkered in its refusal to accommodate large swathes of people. People like Simon who went from important characters in their local communities to forgotten people nevertheless earn our respect through the integrity of their attitude to work. Economic theory is poorer for leaving them out and society is poorer when it follows these ideas and marginalizes them. Wordsworth was partially driven to write the two poems of this article's study to address this tendency.

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