

## WORDSWORTH AND HIS THEORY OF POETRY

By

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### Abstract

*Wordsworth is the leader of the Romantic age. He is an icon who symbolises romantic era. Wordsworth's Prelude is considered to be a magnum opus of all his works. Wordsworth was first a poet than a critic. He gave more importance to feelings than thought. He believed in a simple way of life. He was not in favour of reason and intellect. He believed that poetry should be of breath and a greater spirit. He used the country language for common men and women. He rejected theoretical and conceptual ideas and artificial metaphors. His main aim was to make the reader understand the difference of his theme and style which did not exist earlier. He attached immature and flamboyance phraseology. His poetry was all for human life. The purpose was poetry was to give pleasure. Wordsworth in his theory of criticism of poetry talks about poetry; its subject matter, language, style and the duty of a poet. The paper covers the view of Wordsworth related to poetry as expressed in Preface to Lyrical Ballads.*

**Keywords:** *wordsworth, romantic, theory, poetry, spirit, human life, lyrical ballads*

### Introduction

Wordsworth was first and foremost a poet and later he developed as a critic. His criticism is inspired by his poetry. William Wordsworth was born in Cockermonth, Cumbria, England on April 7, 1770. Wordsworth attended Hawkshead Grammar School, where he found an irresistible appeal for poetry and made his first attempts at verse. On his expedition through Europe, Wordsworth came to learn about the French Revolution. Wordsworth

understood well about the revolution and the purpose of it which later developed in him as interest and sympathy for rustic downtrodden people. These concerns are visible in the works of Wordsworth. William Wordsworth belongs to the period that witnessed a Romantic revolt against the Neo-classical movement. French Revolution and the writing of Rousseau made Wordsworth defy anything that obstructed the normal right and freedom of man. The primary view of Wordsworth's literary criticism

is reflected in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* published by him and his friend Coleridge in 1798. In the preface, Wordsworth sets his theory for poetry, poet, poetic diction and the language for poetry.

### Theory of poetry

Wordsworth rejects and knockdowns the old forms of criticism. He lays a new outlook and possibility in criticism. Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is a work of criticism, where he has propounded the theory of poetry. Wordsworth has distinct poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Wordsworth has an exalted formation of poetry. He feels that "poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science". He not only defines poetry; but also explains the process involved in the production of poetry. His theory of poetry is comprehensive in the sense that it tells us the qualification of the poet, the function of poetry and recommends the language of poetry. Wordsworth has an exalted conception of poetry. According to Wordsworth poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science. In Wordsworth's opinion

poetry should have a purpose. It must achieve something positive. What he defines as its purpose is not something ethical but rather psychological. The purpose of poetry is to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated with a state of excitement.

Wordsworth states; *poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so as its object is truth.* (Wordsworth William 33). He stressed on sincerity, profundity and depth of feeling and passions and redefined poetry as *the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings* (Wordsworth William 33). Wordsworth laid strong objection against the 18<sup>th</sup> century forge classics who used poetry as an expression of artificial and unnatural life of stylish lords and ladies living in all grandeur, physical pleasant appearance and luxuriousness of London city. *We see for the first time certain qualities that were to become more and more common in Wordsworth's later poems. The most noticeable of these qualities in a new tone of tender personal emotion, at its; best pure and strong, and at its worst dangerously near sentimentality, it is a quite different emotion from the sense of social, human sympathy with the general lot of men which underlies poems like The Idiot Boy, the Female*

*Vagrant, the Last of The Flock and so on. With this new tone comes a whole new set of images and references, dealing with flowers, birds, stars and the smaller, prettier details of nature. (Drabble Margaret 64).*

As a result, deep emotion is the fundamental condition of poetry. It is the feeling that matters. Wordsworth castoffs Aristotelian doctrine which mentions the plot or the situation as the first and most important thing.

He has explained the principle objects of poetry, the very beginning of his work. The principle object that Wordsworth proposed to choose was incidents and situations from common life, and to relate and describe them throughout as far as possible in the language of a common man. As said by Wordsworth himself; *The principle object, then proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and; further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them truly though not ostentatiously, the*

*primary laws of nature; chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in the state of excitement (Das & Mohanty 34). Wordsworth's philosophical sympathies lay with the revolutionaries, but his loyalties lay with England, whose monarchy he was not prepared to see overthrown.*

Talking about the *subject matter* of poetry Wordsworth prefers themes and situations from day to day life. It should not be interrelated or associated with anything which can't be easily experimented. The relation between the reader and the poem should be catchable and communicative and not difficult to interconnect. The connectivity should be so strong that while reading a poem, the reader should find himself in the place of character. It should lay such impressions and sentiments that it is about the experiences of the readers that the poet is talking about.

The main object of the poetry should be to make incidents of common life interesting. There a poet should concentrate more on low and rustic life rather than shifting himself to the elite class. Wordsworth believed that the condition of life, the essential passions and elementary feelings of men exist in a state of free association. The purpose

of poetry should be to develop feelings out of the ideas surviving from the feelings of daily life. In Wordsworth's estimation poetry is with purpose. It should be dealt with optimistic, constructive and affirmative ambition. It is the feeling and emotion that plays a key role in the construction of poetry. It is the feeling that creates excitement. Wordsworth does not agree with the Aristotelian dogma of plot and situation as a key factor in the creation of poetry. But on the other hand, he even does not reject the thought completely. For him the feeling is first and then comes the thoughts. Wordsworth finds feelings developed in the poem gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feelings.

*Language* of poetry should always be the language of the common people. Poetry should not apply the hidden language. It should avoid obscurity as to not make poetry difficult for the readers. Language should not be pompous and grandiloquent as it is seen in the poets and poetry of the preceding century. The language should be natural, should imply certain simplicity and immediate comprehensibility for ordinary readers. These make the subject matter more mature and less restraint,

which makes the communication between the reader and the poet more accurate and forcible. The development takes place with elementary feelings that do not know the language of show-off or the song of self-praise. Thus the language of the poetry seems to be integrated with beauties of nature. There is no place for vanity. These things make the poems reach to ordinary hearts.

*Imagination* has a very significant role in framing poetry. It enriches the poetry by adding colour. Wordsworth believes in the enrichment of beauty by adding various colours to it. Common incidents are flat, they lack enthusiasm and interest, to make them interesting for the reader's certain colours should be added. This way the natural and interesting things can be made to look more interesting and beautiful. Beauty and colour should be added with the strangeness of feelings.

*Humble and rustic life* is the chief element or can be called the source of poetry. Wordsworth believes that real human life lies in rural and simple people. It is here that ordinary mankind lives and here itself one can find the ordinary language. The essential passion of heart finds a better soil in which they can attain their maturity. They find freedom of

expression less under control. The speech is plain and forceful; the stress is laid for clearness of significance. Wordsworth further adds that it is in the humble and rustic life the primary feelings can be meditated and communicated forcefully. The reason that he states behind it is that the primary feelings come from the basic character of the natural self, they are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The rustic people have a narrow and limited circle, where these rustic people do not hold or presume very high opinion about themselves. They hold plain and unelaborated expressions. They are not like poets who pay emphasis to opinion or impulse rather than reason. These poets to remain with one expression but they keep on changing according to the comfort of their creation. Such practices and things lead to triviality and meanness of thought and feelings.

Wordsworth talks about the *worthy purpose* of poetry. The poetry should always come with a purpose of enlightenment for the readers and then the affections strengthened and purified. A poet should be the representative of past feelings, and with the help of contemplation he should relate with each other and

through this process, the poet will come close to important subjects related to mankind i.e. *worthy purpose*. The feeling in poetry is the primary source and the action and situation is the secondary source. The poetry should not be taken over by action and situation at the primary level and feeling for the secondary level instead it should be vice-versa Feelings.

Wordsworth has a special admiration for *personification* in poetry. Personification is an important figure of poetry. It is not used simply for the elevation of style or to bring something different. Whereas he explains that the use of personification is related to passion. It is used to bring life in poetry. Where he says that he has to keep the reader in flesh and blood. Personification should not be associated with style or device used in making poetry; it should be used to make the poetry interesting. This should only be the aim of the poet while using poetry.

Wordsworth wanted something different in the poetry, not a common form, which is generally accepted by the poets. Having this kind of interest, he had in mind that he did not look for something much different which would make him left from the general group of poets. He did not like to recommend

things that would turn out to be generally unacceptable. He wanted the readers to be aware of his subject; there is no place for falsehood but something new and different. Not a matter of phrases and speech carried out from *father to son*, which is a common inheritance of poets.

*Metre* in the poem has no significance in the formation of poetry. Wordsworth has restricted the unnecessary use of metre just for the systematic arrangement of lines in the poetry. If the metrical lines are arranged and placed in an uninteresting way they create a matter of criticism. The critics take advantage and spell out extended criticism that the readers are compelled to reject the poetry even they find it interesting. The critics take the advantage of poets' weakness and place it in the form of criticism with elaboration before the readers. The critics even try to prove that a poet is an ignorant man, not aware of his own line of work. Wordsworth did not find any difference between the language of a good poetry and the language of a prose. He remarked; "it may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. The language of men

should be the language of writing. It needs purification from provincialism and freedom from all rational causes of disgust and dislike." If a poem is written in prose with well interpretation and feeling, it becomes a good poem. Milton is one of the best examples of this sort of writing. Unnecessary prosaisms in the poem make it difficult for the readers to get connected with the poem and poet as well. On the other side, Wordsworth admires the use of metaphors and figures of poetry. He lays emphasis on the judicious approach of the poet while writing poetry. This alone can separate the poetry and the poet from any irregularity and help the poet to bring the poem in harmony leaving behind any congruity. Wordsworth further claims that if his approach toward writing poetry is followed by the readers then many of the criticism given for great poets will change the mind of readers and will be corrected and purified.

To deal with humble and rustic people developed within Wordsworth through his democratic sentiments that had been stirred by the *French Revolution* as Graham Hough says; *it is from this root that his technical interest in the language of simple life naturally springs, if real humanity is to be found*

*among simple people, this is also the place to look for real human speech* (Graham Hough, 2017).

Wordsworth says that mere metrical arrangement cannot make difference between poetry and prose. It is an artificial distinction. If poetry comes with true taste and feeling it has to come with the language of men, not merely with metrical composition. If poetry is written in a language of ordinary men and with the common situation, it will have true taste and feeling; it will have a distinctive place of far greater. Metaphors and figure add life to the poems. The poems become good creativity if the subject and language be selected with a good sense with milder character, the style subdued and temperate.

The *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* is the work with suggestions where Wordsworth tried to bring his ground-breaking poetic dogma where he paid more emphasis to his aims and objects, policies and programmes, priorities and commitments. It was his experiment for new ideas and techniques. *Lyrical Ballads* gives a very clear idea of what Wordsworth was having in his mind and what was his fundamental purpose, aim and objective behind the publication of his *Lyrical Ballads*: where he says in the

opening lines; *The first volume of these poems have already been submitted to general perusal. It was published as an experiment, which I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, own far, by fitting to the material I arrangement of a selection of real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that quality of pleasure may be imparted, which; a poet may rationally endeavour to impart. I had, formed no very inaccurate estimate of the probable; effect of these poems; I flattered myself that they who should be, pleased with them would read them with more than common! pleasure, and on the other hand, I was well aware, that by those! f who should dislike them, they would be read with more than; common dislike.... Several of my friends are anxious for the success of those poems form a belief that if the views with which they were composed were indeed realised, a class of poetry would bj produced well adopted to interest mankind permanently.....* (William Wordsworth 18-19).

Wordsworth tries to place the *Poet* as a distinctive character. Therefore he places several questions about the poet. What is meant by the poet? What is a poet? Whom does he address? Wordsworth defines poets as a man talking to a man, possessing knowledge with sensibility and

enthusiasm. Wordsworth always believed that a poet should not be irregular rather is a human being with normal interests of mankind. Wordsworth considers the poet as a clairvoyant. The poet himself is a man speaking to men of his kind but is different from others in the degree of certain qualities. Poet is capable of expressing more lively sensibility, fervour and compassion with adding the colour of fertile imagination than any common men can do.

Poet is a person, who produces passions, bringing out things which are really absent as if they were present with delights. He uses a language of general men in a modified way with his power of expressions. The job of a poet is to some extent mechanical, as he has to bring the action and suffering of persons whose feelings he describes. The duty of a poet is to relate himself with the character he has chosen. He has to identify himself among his characters. The best way for a poet to succeed in his work is to make a selection of natural things with the help of fancy and imagination, which is called by Wordsworth (Principle of Selection). This will help the poet bring truth and reality in his poems. If a poet finds difficult to narrate things naturally with the help of fancy and

imagination or with the language of the common man than he should place himself as a translator.

Wordsworth understands the pressure that a poet has to face. Therefore he feels how great the poet maybe, he is sure to fall short of feelings and language of real life. In this situation a poet should try to bring his feelings near to the real feelings which he wants to express and only try to modify the language to bring pleasure.

Wordsworth believes that a poet is a distinguished individual with superior ability and sense, an individual who is above the common people. He states; *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 more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them* (Das & Mohanty 40-41). Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men

bearing the power of greater swiftness to imagine and feel. He has eternal excitement, and greater power in expressing such thoughts, emotions and powerful feelings. It captures its origin from solitude and thoughts in pensive loneliness. When these thoughts are written in the form of verses, it makes poetry. Then now these feelings are in their pure form. About the poet, he assumes that a poet has greater knowledge of the world and nature. Poet is expressing his experience and knowledge to common men, writing for the men. He is registering not only for the poets and philosophers but for all men, so his language must be understandable for a common man and a countryside reader. According to him poet is a person talking to men, and his thoughts are the thoughts of a common man, and all his wording should be a language of a common man like a clown, farmer and countryman so that each and everyone could read and get equal pleasure.

Coleridge does not agree with the opinion of Wordsworth, he criticises Wordsworth pointing out that all his characters are not chosen from low and rustic life, e.g. the characters in

poems like *Ruth, Michael, The brothers* etc. the language which Wordsworth uses is not of social standing. The same language will appear in both rustic and city life. Moreover, Coleridge maintains that Wordsworth's theory of poetic Diction can be applicable to certain classes of poetry only but it can never be a rule of general application. In this connection, he refers to Aristotle's conception of poetry as essentially ideal, so that individual characters in poetry should be general and typical, and their feelings should be typical and representative of the whole class.

### **Conclusion**

Wordsworth feels that poetry is the breath and greater strength of mind and of all knowledge. It has the expression which comes from the heart. It can stand with all disciplines. He not only defines poetry; but also explains the process involved in the production of poetry. His theory of poetry is comprehensive in the sense that it tells us the qualification of the poet, the function of poetry and recommends the language of poetry. Wordsworth has a high and glorious notion of poetry.

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