

A Scientific Re-evaluation of William Wordsworth's Love of Nature from Ecological and Environmental Perspectives

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Abstract

William Wordsworth's love of nature has been a subject of interpretation by many critics. This study looks at Wordsworth's love of nature through the lens of science and evaluates its relevance to the fields of ecology, ecofeminism and environmentalism. A neurological analysis of this love provides the basis of this study. Wordsworth's love of nature is an all-inclusive love which places the poet into the modern-day discourse on deep ecology. Besides, the poet's way of elevating nature by way of womanizing her is a lesson for all those for whom nature is feminine but the 'Other'. Finally, Wordsworth's love of nature might ultimately contribute to the environmental movements of today's world as the works of William Wordsworth teach mankind not only to love nature for her own sake, but also to feel that nature is an integral part of man's essential self.

Keywords: Love of nature, affective neuroscience, ecology, ecofeminism, modern day

Introduction

With the introduction of ecocriticism, there is a renewed interest in William Wordsworth's love of nature. Modern critics, natural scientists and even environmentalists look for new insights in Wordsworth's poetry. It is believed that there is a lot to learn from the man and nature relationship that Wordsworth demonstrates both in his personal life and his treatment of nature in his poetry. This English Romantic of the late 18th century can rightly be called the 'Poet of Nature'. The presentation of nature in his poetry is unique because the persona, who often is the representation of the poet himself, is found amidst nature. Most often, this persona not only loves the natural beauty, but also indulges in thoughts which his surroundings generate in him. The deep love of nature, that William Wordsworth has, is either implicit or explicit in these thoughts. In the context of modern day ecology, this kind of love may fall into the category called 'Deep Ecology' which according to Pite, is "an extension of sympathy that reaches so far and becomes so constant that the self loses any desire to differentiate between itself and the world" (Pite, as cited in, Hutchings 2007, p. 182). It is true that, there had been nature poets before Wordsworth and there have been many more after him. However, Wordsworth stands supreme among them because of the extra-ordinary kind of love that he demonstrates towards nature and the thoughts or views that he presents. The purpose of this article is to make analyses of

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Wordsworth's feelings and thoughts about nature in some of his poems and find how relevant they are in modern ecological context.

Literature Review

There have been a few research works already carried out to connect William Wordsworth's nature views with modern day ecocriticism. To posit Wordsworth in the field of 'Ecocriticism' Abolfazl Ramazani & Elmira Bazregarzadeh claim, "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" (Ramazani & Bazregarzadeh, 2014, p. 1). To exemplify this claim, Mohammad Moniruzzaman Mia who made a comparison between John Keats and Wordsworth, may be quoted, "his (Wordsworth's) nature poetry took a new turn passing beyond sensuous penetration and description of nature with a keen moral and ecocritical insights" (Miah, 2012, p. 1795). The main focus of all his works is the relationship between man and nature which is also the core of the scientific field called 'Ecology'? The interdisciplinary discourse called 'Ecocriticism'. Jonathan Bate (1991) in *Romantic Ecology* opines that Wordsworth's interest in the non-human or nature is a "conservative ideology" which is a quest for "a harmonious relationship with nature" (Bate, 1991, p. 19). This harmonious relation can ultimately create the urge in human mind to preserve nature. Thus, Wordsworth's love of nature may be crucial for the environmentalists of the present world. McKusick expresses the belief that Wordsworth's thoughts about nature may contribute significantly to modern day Environmentalism. He maintains that Wordsworth had a "vital influence" on and "contributed to the fundamental ideas and core values of the modern environmental movement" (McKusick, 2000, p.11). All these researches are based on how Wordsworth presents nature in his poetry. However, what seems to be a relatively unexplored area is a modern and scientific evaluation of the poet's 'Love of Nature'. This is, probably, because love is too personal and too simple a feeling to be explored and in Wordsworth's case, his love of nature has often been tainted as an escape from his disillusionment with the French Revolution. This research work makes an attempt to interpret Wordsworth's love of nature using modern tools like Neural Science, Ecology, Ecofeminism, etc.

A Neurological Analysis of Wordsworth's Love of Nature

William Wordsworth's entire canon is basically a deep and sustained meditation on love of nature. The modern way of looking at this love of nature is, rather, scientific. For example, Seth T. Reno presents a study on the neurological basis of Wordsworth's love of nature in his article "Rethinking Romantics' Love of Nature". He turns to affective neuroscience and finds that even simple tree hugging has psychological and physiological benefits. It is found from recent researches in affective neuroscience that meditation on love and compassion can "rewire the neural circuitry of the brain" (Reno, 2016, p. 29). Reno refers to the series of electro encephalographical studies accomplished by Richard Davidson and other neuroscientists on Tibetan monks to support his view. These researches

accomplished by Antoine Lutz and some other scientists prove that “deep and sustained meditation” that is not based on objects and “loving-kindness and compassion” that is “unconditional” “generate[s] unprecedented levels of brain activity that shape consciousness and cognitive processes” (Lutz et al., as cited in, Reno, 2016, p. 29). The love resulted from this process is all-inclusive love which the ecophilosophers call “ecological love”. The research also proves:

Sustained meditation on love can produce “high-amplitude gamma synchrony,” or a heightened awareness of the unity of consciousness—that is, a unified movement of various parts of the brain related to perception, cognition, and affect. One can feel consciousness. (Reno, 2016, p. 30)

Reno also believes that “the very act of thinking about love has significant neurological and cognitive effects” (Reno, 2016, p. 29). Davidson takes it one step further by saying that “it is a state of being” in which “the particulars of subjects and objects dissipate into the sole content of experience” (Davidson, as cited in, Reno, 2016, p. 29). All these finally come down to the declaration that Reno makes at the end, “Love, it seems, affects the way the brain works just as much as the brain and its cognitive processes affect our perceptions and conceptions of love” (Reno, 2016, p. 30).

Thus, affective neuroscience offers a material basis for reconsidering William Wordsworth’s love of nature. He was engaged with the real world of things. This research work makes an attempt to prove that Wordsworth’s thoughts about nature were rooted in science. In *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth writes about the mutual dependence between a poet and a scientist. According to Wordsworth, the poet “will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of Science, . . . carrying sensation into the midst of the object of the Science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist will be as proper objects of the Poet’s art” (Wordsworth, as cited in, Reno, 2016, 30). This proves that he was very much aware of the connectedness that poetry and science share between them. He, very consciously, situates his poetry within the scientific discourses of his time. In a note to his poem, “The Thorn”, the poet defines poetry as “the history or science of feelings” (Wordsworth, as cited in, Reno, 2016, p. 29). Reno (2016) believes that contemplation on love of nature makes the brain produce “a state of being in which love subsumes the subject”. Wordsworth considers it as the proper moment to begin composition of a poem. When Wordsworth achieves “blessed mood” in “Tintern Abbey” (1798) and “see[s] into the life of things” (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 205-207), it should be understood that it is an actual state of mind that the poet really experiences. Even the “sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 205-207) probably tells more about science than about transcendent idealism.

Wordsworth demonstrates his love of nature in his personal life as well. In 1799, he came to Grasmere from Goslar, Germany to get settled at Dove Cottage. This brought the poet closer to nature. He probably felt the interconnectedness

that a man feels while living amidst nature. In fact, looking at the oneness that the poet develops between himself and nature, one may claim, “affective engagement with nature can unlock the bodily, material processes of interconnectedness and transcendence” (Reno, 2016, p. 31). There are many instances of this interconnectedness in Wordsworth’s poetry. For example, in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”, the poet writes: “And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Forebode not any severing of our loves! / Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;” (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 125-127) and the result is the further deepening of his love:

I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet; (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 125-127)

William Wordsworth and the Modern Day Ecology

Thus, deep love of nature ultimately creates the interconnectedness which is the basis of modern day “ecology”. Ernst Haeckel who first coined the word “Ecology” defines it as “that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings” (Haeckel, as cited in, Hutchings, 2007). There are critics who view Wordsworth as the pioneer in the field of ecology. Johnathan Bates, James McKusik, Seth T. Reno, and others believe, “Romantic nature poetry is actually the first instance of western proto-ecological literature” (Huntington, 2017, p. 1). And the poet of nature William Wordsworth is ahead of all other Romantics in prioritizing nature and portraying the relationship between all living organisms. Even the non-living ones like fountains, meadows, hills and brooks are important to the poet.

William Wordsworth and Modern Day Environmentalism

The ecological perspective implicit in Wordsworth’s poetry may contribute to modern-day environmentalism. McKusick confirms this view when apart from labeling Wordsworth as one of the “founders of English Romanticism”, he also says that the poet had a “vital influence” on and “contributed to the fundamental ideas and core values of the modern environmental movement” (McKusick, 2005, p. 5-11). William Wordsworth was probably aware of environmental degradation as this phenomenon had started much before Wordsworth. Kevin Hutchings’ view may be quoted to support this, “We witness some of the first instances of a developing awareness of nature’s ecological fragility, and the need for humans to reconsider their environmental practices, even prior to the British Romantic period” (Hutchings, 2017, p.175). Examples of this are abundant in Hutchings’ article titled “Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies”. Naturalist John Evelyn expressed his concern in the seventeenth century that English deforestation had reached epidemical proportion (Evelyn, as cited in, Hutchings, 2017, p.175). Ackroyd believes, “anthropogenic toxins had been compromising air quality in and around London since the Medieval period” (Ackroyd, as cited

in, Hutchings, p. 175). And during Romantic period there were certain developments raising further concerns. The most important among them was the rapid industrialization of England. It is a fact that whenever any economy becomes industrialized, it is nature that generally bears the brunt of industrial onslaught. In eighteenth century England as well, at the dawn of industrial revolution, there was a growing concern regarding how nature would suffer. In Hutchings's (2017) view, "it was during the Romantic era, which witnessed a sharp rise in urban populations and an increasingly industrialized economy, that environmental problems became much more severe and noticeable, taking on a new sense of urgency".

William Wordsworth was definitely aware of this looming threat on nature. Some critics consider Wordsworth's love of nature partly as a reaction against the rising industrial revolution in England. For example, Carlisle Huntington and Seth T. Reno agree that Wordsworth's love of nature has a political dimension. Huntington believes that the "love for the natural world" that the poet "express [es], is still, in many ways, an inherently political act" (Huntington 2017). And Seth T. Reno believes that Wordsworth's love of nature is actually a resistance towards "industrialization, consumer capitalism, and certain strands of conservative ideology" (Reno, 2016, p. 28). The poet is not vocal against the harmful environmental practices. Rather, his love of nature takes the form of a yearning for unharmed nature. For example, the poet who often disliked the "joyless daylight" and "fretful stir" (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 205-207) of city life, pours out sincere appreciation for the morning beauty of London city in the "smokeless air" in "Composed upon Westminster Bridge":

The beauty of the morning, silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky,
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air. (Wordsworth, 1994,
p. 269)

The lines also hint at Wordsworth's idea about sustainable development. In any civilized society, development is an unavoidable and continuous process. However, this should not be at the cost of nature. All the measures should be taken to minimize the damage that nature suffers.

The poet's urge to keep nature unharmed is implicit in "Tintern Abbey" also. The poem is, first of all, an expression of Wordsworth's love of the natural surroundings on the bank of river Wye. In the first stanza of the poem, the repetition of the word "again" several times is an evidence of the poet's "sheer delight" in the "unchanged appearance of the landscape" as James C. McKusick (2005) writes, "he [Wordsworth] celebrates the endurance of wild natural beauty, even in the midst of intensive human occupation". Other than the idea of preservation, the poem also reflects Wordsworth's thoughts about sustainable development and connectedness that the poet feels between him and nature. The following lines may be considered:

Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky. (Wordsworth, 1994, p.
205-207)

The stanza begins with the subject 'I' who 'behold[s]'. But in the subordinate clause, 'lofty cliffs' becomes the subject. The immediate impression of the readers may be that "thoughts of more deep seclusion" are being pressed on the observer's mind. However, one must not miss the grammatical and phenomenological shifts that Wordsworth effects here. Jonathan Bate, after having a close look at the lines, comes to the conclusion, "what Wordsworth in fact states is that the thoughts are impressed on the scene itself. Nature is made capable of feeling. The 'I' is written out or absorbed into the scene". So, when the poet mentions 'deep seclusion', he means that the self dissolves from the observer's eye into ecologically connected organism. (Bate, 2000, p.145)

There are a few more observations by Bate that tells why this poem is ecocritically so important. First, the very location of the poem is critical. William Wordsworth locates his poem several miles above Tintern Abbey at an unspecified spot and thinks about "the life of things" (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 205-207). This is different from the common practice which is to stand amidst the abbey ruins and reflect on mortality. Thus, the informative subtitle of the poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798" contains the most important elements of an ecosystem- life and nature. Next, the following lines from the poem may be considered:

These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 205-207)

The poet presents before us "a cottage economy which does not 'disturb' the ecosystem" (Bate 146). This is a lesson for all those responsible for the ironwork just a few miles below because according to Bate (2000, p.146), this ironwork "was destroying the bioregional balance and polluting the Wye". Besides, these lines also present Wordsworth's idea of sustainable development. In any successful ecosystem, there must be a balance. For example, there will be predators but their predation will not affect the overall sustainability of that ecosystem. In a piece of land where wildness and agriculture coexist in as healthy a form as mentioned in the lines, sustainability is ensured. Jonathan Bate

believes, “the predatory aspect of agricultural production is imagined to be lost within the larger landscape. The colour green is attached to both orchard and uncultivated land. This is an image of sustainable productivity” (Bate, 2000, p.146).

Modern day environmentalists may take this example of ‘sustainable productivity’ as a model. However, there have been arguments raised regarding Wordsworth’s ecological stance. Some critics accuse Wordsworth of “big-organism chauvinism” (Wilson, as cited in, Hutchings, 2007, p. 181) which means Wordsworth valued only large and aesthetically pleasant organisms over and above such things as bugs, weeds or vermin. Kevin Hutchings writes, “in their panegyrics to nature, major Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge are not immune to such chauvinistic ‘speciesism’” (Hutchings, 2007, p.182). But Karl Kroeber defends Wordsworth in his famous essay “Home at Grasmere: Ecological Holiness” with the following words:

Now there are defenders of the environment of alligators, water-moccasins, and leeches. Wordsworth, without the advantage of reptile-rich or insect-rich surroundings, foreshadows late twentieth-century conservation. He argues that man's humanity is completely realized only within nature's “inhumanity”. He praises unspectacular places and usually unfecund ones. ‘Nature’ to him is what we now call an ecological unity. (Kroeber, 1974, p. 132)

Deep Ecological Aspects of Wordsworth’s Love of Nature

Such debates put Wordsworth’s love of nature under scrutiny again and place the eighteenth century nature-poet within the modern day discourse on ‘deep ecology’. The term ‘deep ecology’ was invented by Arne Naess in a famous 1973 English language article “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary”. Michael P. Nelson believes that supporters of deep ecology are against the “human-centered value system” which is the basis of European and North American industrial culture. Deep ecologists believe that “environmental philosophy must recognize the values that inhere objectively in nature independently of human wants, needs or desires” (Hutchings, 2007, p. 191). So, to state it in a more simple way, an advocate of deep ecology values the natural world and wants to protect it because of the intrinsic values of non-human elements in nature and not because “human life depends upon nature’s wellbeing (regardless of the important truth of this proposition)” (Hutchings, 2007, p. 181).

It may be claimed that Wordsworth’s love of nature falls into the category of deep ecology. The poet’s experience of blessed mood may be analyzed here:

.....that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 205-207)

There is a strong suggestion that this experience produces ecological thinking in the poet. His love of nature produces a state of being which has a physiological basis. He almost transcends his 'corporeal frame' and becomes 'a living soul'. When Wordsworth meditates on this physiological affect, he achieves a "mood," or state of being, in which love subsumes his subjectivity and subject/ object binary is simply erased. He "can see into the life of things" or in the words of Seth T. Reno, "Wordsworth sees the interdependence of and fluidity between all things in the world (a hallmark of the ecological thought)" (Reno, 2016, p. 41). From deep ecological perspective, this may be a perfect example of a mind that has overcome the barrier of anthropocentrism and has become one with all other beings and even the inanimate objects of nature. Someone with such a mindset can only bring good to nature.

The far-reaching influence of Wordsworth's deep ecological stance should be judged against the backdrop of Enlightenment science and how developments in the field of science had shaped the relationship between man and nature. Scientists of the era taught people to look at nature with reason. To quote Mark Lussier, Enlightenment science "valorize[ed] reason at the expense of other aspects of self and thenature within which that self emerges" (Lussier, 2000). There was a line drawn between human subjective world and the external realm of objects. Science, then, placed human subjectivity in privileged opposition to nature. Nature turned into a subject under human observation and experimentation. Michel Serres believes that this had become the tradition before Wordsworth- a tradition that had been drawn from "Francis Bacon's empiricism, Isaac Newton's physics, and René Descarte's philosophical concept of a mechanistic, clock-work universe inhabited by thinking subjects." Human beings were radically separated from nature and their proper role was to "dominate and appropriate" as they had become the masters and possessors of the natural world (Serres, 1992). Thus, Enlightenment science reduced nature into "inanimate matter" which could only serve "as grist for the mill of the industrial revolution" (Lussier, 2000, p. 49). This became the root cause behind nature's despoliation as Jonathan Bate says, "man's presumption of his own apartness from nature is the prime cause of the environmental degradation of the earth" (Bate, 2000, p.36).

William Wordsworth and Modern Day Ecofeminism

William Wordsworth's love of nature presented a completely different way of looking at nature. In addition to the earlier discussion on Wordsworth's deep ecological view about nature, this research work will look into his proclivity for womanizing nature. In fact, Wordsworth deserves an important place in the modern day discourse on 'Ecofeminism'. It is both a theory and a movement that

“sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women” (Mellor, 1997, p. 1). Ecofeminism emerged in the mid-1970s. Ecofeminists blame man’s androcentric attitude for the destruction of nature. Jonathan Bate adds, “ecofeminism is that discourse which addresses the causes and effects, the strengths and the dangers, of the traditional personification of Nature as mother” (Bate, 2000, p.75). In many of his poems, William Wordsworth personifies nature as a female entity. An ecofeministic study of some of Wordsworth’s poems may provide valuable insights and positively change man’s androcentric attitude towards nature. In his poem “Nutting”, the speaker recounts his childhood experience when in an outing he destroyed a “virgin scene”:

Then up I rose,
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage: and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 185)

This act is comparable with sexual violence against Mother Nature. However, the speaker experiences a sense of guilt and remorse which ultimately leads him to the following realization:

Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky. —
Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods. (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 185)

Wordsworth imbues nature with “spirit” and affirms that nature has its inherent value. It is implicit in the lines that he demands the same respect and love for nature which the feminists expect for women from the society. Besides, in his personal life, Wordsworth finds women as media connecting him with nature. In *The Prelude*, his wife Mary and in “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”, his sister Dorothy stands for “the power that reintegrates the poet with nature” (Bate, 2000, p. 150):

and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,

If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 205-207)

Moreover, the abbey or the monastery is simply absent from the whole poem. The poet does not mention it even for once in the poem and stands a few miles above it to reunite himself with the surrounding nature. Jonathan Bate looks at it as the expulsion of “the patriarchal God once worshipped by the monks of Tintern Abbey” from the poet’s vision. Wordsworth, instead, worships “a maternal nature” (Bate, 2000, p. 150).

Conclusion

William Wordsworth’s love of nature finds relevance to modern-day environmentalism, nature-science and even neuroscience. Civilization and modernization bring with them lots of evils which find expressions in men’s treatment with men, men’s treatment with women and men’s treatment with nature. This research work would make the claim that in Wordsworth’s love of nature, there lie the solutions of all these evils. Actually, Wordsworth’s famous declaration in *The Prelude* (1805), “Love of Nature lead[s] to Love of Mankind” (Wordsworth, as cited in, Reno, 2016, p. 28) says it all. It shows that ‘love’ really is the key and when it is about saving the environment, ‘love of nature’ is the first and most important pre-condition. In an era of impending threats to the global environment, science and technology will, of course, continue to play their vital roles to abate the damage done to nature by human hand. But as they say, ‘Prevention is better than cure’, there should be a change in the collective conscience of mankind so that this damage is either minimized or does not take place at all in the first place. James C McKusick realizes this. Referring to the struggle of Western environmentalists, he writes, “Perhaps there is something amiss in the deep matrix of Western culture. Maybe what is needed is not a quick technological fix, but a fundamental change in human consciousness” (McKusick, 2005, p. 200). And Literature is one of those few disciplines that can raise this consciousness as confirmed by Jonathan Bate, “The business of literature is to work upon consciousness” (Bate, 2000, p. 23). If this is true, then it is essential to examine Wordsworth’s love of nature which may lead one to fundamental ethical values and combined with modern environmental science, this may have enough influence on human efforts to save Mother Nature.

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