



## WORDSWORTH'S TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN HIS POETRY

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**Abstract:** Women in the poetry of Wordsworth have always been the centre of interest. It cannot be denied that he was very much influenced by contemporary status of women in society. Women in his personal life, also, had a role to play. But, how did he depict women in his poetry? The objective of this paper is thus to explore the treatment of women in the poetry of Wordsworth. The findings reveal that in Wordsworth's poetry, women are important but they are never dominating. He maintained this strange balance in his poetry. Although female figures, in Wordsworth, manifest suffering, isolation and alienation, they never fail to occupy the central position. Besides, readers cannot but sympathize and fall in love with these women. Although Wordsworth was not a feminist in the strict sense of the term; his way of paying tribute to women, in a patriarchal social construct, is exemplary

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### Introduction

William Wordsworth maintained a very cautious approach while portraying women in his poetry. They are neither dominating nor devoid of any particular significance. Rather, they seem to have maintained a status between these two extremes. If it is judged from a feminist's point of view, Wordsworth does not really qualify too highly in the consciences of his readers. Rather, it would be appropriate to say that the way he has depicted women and the feminine aspects in his poetry, have actually undermined the feminist causes. In most of his poems, we find the female protagonist playing a subordinate role. Women seem to be synonymous or compared with Nature which can be completely annihilated by man. Besides, in most cases, female characters are in third person showing their passiveness in the face of the writer's self-assertion and self-positioning. Women have been portrayed as weak, volatile, and something less than human. While talking about them, his predominant emphasis was on their sufferings which actually reinforce the historical period's gender stereotypes of women as helpless, inferior victims. But, reducing Wordsworth to a conventional patriarchal villain—as some feminist critics, Page (1994) for example, consider him to be—will be too harsh a criticism for someone who did not escape the gender ideologies of his time. It is, therefore, justified to profile the treatment of women in the poetry of Wordsworth. This paper explores this central issue with reference to a few celebrated poems like “The Thorn”, “Tintern Abbey”, “Immortality Ode” and the “Lucy Poems”.

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### Analyses and Discussion

Wordsworth's treatment of women in his poetry was certainly influenced to a great extent by the women in his personal life. Women in his house had to perform two folds of duties: doing the laundry and taking dictation as well as labouring to make fair copies of manuscripts. In Dorothy Wordsworth's journals we find an attestation of this fact as ladies like Dorothy, Mary Wordsworth, Mary's sister Sara Hutchinson and later the Wordsworth's daughter Dora and her friend Isabella Fenwick used to provide domestic and editorial help. But more important than all these was, perhaps the fact that these women were the source of inspiration for Wordsworth's poetry. They were the ones who provided emotional and intellectual context in which he could write. If these women had direct and positive impact on the creations of William Wordsworth, there are at least two more female figures that could have disturbed his conscience with a sense of guilt and empathy.

Wordsworth's abandonment of Annette Vallon, his first love, and their daughter Caroline are finally connected in his imagination to his feelings of abandonment by his mother (who died when he was eight) and to his lifelong fear of further loss. Thus, in his life, there is a paradoxical sense of abandonment as he had suffered the bereavement of his mother before he himself left Annette Vallon and Caroline. And it will not be improper to say that all these experiences with women shaped Wordsworth's impression about women and his subsequent treatment of them in his poetry. That is why the grieving or abandoned women in his poetry-in the *Lyrical Ballads*, in "Laodamia," and in *The Excursion*- can be seen as expressions of guilt and empathy.

The poems like "The Thorn", "Tintern Abbey", "Immortality Ode" and the "Lucy Poems" are the ones that can give a complete picture of Wordsworth's portrayal of women. The pattern that these poems establish is that though Wordsworth had always been very sympathetic towards women, he did not believe in their dominant roles in life. The supreme position used to be kept for males.

In "Tintern Abbey", the presence of Dorothy is as a silent auditor. And this surely gives a strange feeling to the reader. He suddenly becomes aware of the presence of a second person in the poem. Initially, the poem seems to be so much a monologue that the sister's presence gives the reader a jolt. The silence of Dorothy gives rise to a few questions in our mind. Is she there only as a machinery to convey Wordsworth's own message? Is there any deliberate attempt to suppress her voice? Is her opinion being regarded as something holding no importance at all? Although, we do not get direct answers to these questions, we realize that a kind of gender related metaphysics is working behind the treatment of Dorothy. To put it in the words of Day (1996) in the chapter named "Gender and the Sublime" in *Romanticism*, "priority and ultimacy reside with the masculine while the feminine is accorded a secondary, supportive role". Dorothy is placed as a kind of silent, supplementary support to the male speaker's imagination.

In "Immortality Ode", the 'Earth' is portrayed as having some feminine characteristics. As Day (ibid) observes, mother "Earth" in this poem is associated with the sensory and natural. But its role in the poem is limited to a certain point. She is paying compensation to the poet for his irreparable loss and offering consolation with whatever she has;

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;  
Yearning she hath in her own natural kind,  
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,  
And no unworthy aim,  
The homely Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her inmate Man,

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Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came. (79-86)<sup>1</sup>

As Day (1996) says,

here, the feminine Earth is seen as inferior to the spiritual glory of what is only her 'Foster-child', her inmate 'Man', so in *The Prelude* feminine nature is not of ultimate or fundamental significance. That significance is reserved for the spiritual, the invisible, the transcendental, which in contradistinction to feminine nature is associated with the masculine. Nor is it unimportant that that masculinized spiritual power is described in terms of imperial power ('that imperial palace'). In this economy the feminine is expunged by the divinely sanctioned, masculine, imperial force of spirit or imagination.

The treatment of feminine as sensory and natural is again reflected in Lucy Poems. Although, Lucy seems to be the central character, she is valued up to a certain point. The male poet's imagination seems to have occupied the dominant position. The identity of Lucy has always been a controversy. 'Who was Lucy?' There is no answer to this question except to say that it is irrelevant. Lucy may or may not have been inspired by Dorothy Wordsworth, by Annette Vallon, or by another young woman. Whoever Lucy is, she remains an elusive figure. Like Dorothy, Lucy is also mute throughout all the poems. Wordsworth, too, has tried to depict Lucy as an isolated and mysterious individual:

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky. (Lucy Poem: "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways", 5-8)<sup>2</sup>

The image of the half-hidden violet suggests that the poet is not inclined that much to make Lucy known to the world as she remains 'unnoticed'. Being a flower 'hidden from the eye', her vulnerability, too, is also exposed to some extent. The image of a fair but solitary star intensifies the same idea- she is beautiful but she is completely isolated which exposes her helplessness.

The third poem of this series to be considered is "A slumber did my spirit seal", where Lucy's identity under goes a peculiar change. The two stanzas below reveal that Lucy has indeed become a 'thing'. Like an inanimate object, she is motionless; without any force. She is no more important than 'rocks', 'stones' and 'trees' that 'rolled round' the sun with the earth itself. And all of these are under the authority of the universe, which is in every way, a masculine figure.

A SLUMBER did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seem'd a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees. (1-8)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abrams, M. H. et al. eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*

<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, Margaret. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

Although Lucy is no more important than other natural objects, it is the male poet's mind that gives her a special stature in the mind of the readers. These descriptions may exert the fact that Lucy has been trivialized to some extent. But one may argue that they certainly do not exhibit the picture of Wordsworth's treatment of Lucy. These objects of Nature like 'violet' or 'star' can bear some other interpretations also. The image of a solitary shining 'star', apart from suggesting remoteness, establishes the fact that it had an 'unrivalled splendour'. Both the 'star' and the 'half-hidden' 'violet' attest the fact which according to Gardiner (1990) "while Lucy was unremarkable to others, she was of supreme significance to the poet." The first two lines of the concluding stanza continue the emphasis on the world's indifference to Lucy; reflected in the unemotional, matter of fact description of her death:

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
(Lucy Poem: "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways", 9-10)<sup>4</sup>

But how important she was to the poet and how acute his loss was to him are clearly expressed in the following two lines:

But she is in her grave, and oh,  
The difference to me!  
(Lucy Poem: "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways", 11-12)<sup>5</sup>

The grief and pain felt by the poet is clearly reflected in the words of Durrant (1979:77):

In these last two lines, a dramatic change, a recognition, is achieved with a sudden shift of point of view. To one who loved her, Lucy- who has not 'disturbed the universe'- is immeasurably valuable and though her death makes no difference to the world, it makes an inexpressible difference to one person. The poignancy of this recognition is increased by the isolation of the mourner; grief is all the harder to bear because it is not shared, and because there is no reason why it should be shared.

In "The Thorn", we are introduced to a woman named Martha Ray who is the central figure of this poem. Her fate drags her to the last point of distress. She has been betrayed and abandoned by her male lover Stephen Hill. But that is just the beginning of her misery. The entire village accuses her of killing her illegitimate child. Apart from this monstrous allegation, there is also a general suspicion of her being a witch. The poet, himself, aggravates all these by casting a mysterious atmosphere around her as nothing of the birth, existence or death of that child has been dealt with in concrete terms. And the mystery reaches its peak when the mossy hill shakes which drives away the villagers intending to punish her for her imaginary misdeeds. Wordsworth's depiction of Martha Ray raises sympathy in us. It is not she who corrupted the love-relationship. Although she has relinquished her virginity, she has done it:

...with a maiden's true good-will  
Her company to Stephen Hill; ("The Thorn", 106-107)<sup>6</sup>

Stephen Hill is the one who is to blame for what has happened to Martha Ray as he has betrayed Martha and abandoned her on their day of wedding. The accusation that she has killed

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Abrams, M. H. et al. eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*

her newborn child is simply a speculation without any base. And the poetic justice ultimately takes place in the form of a supernatural event when the nature comes to the rescue of the woman from the approaching mob. This intervention of nature itself bears out the innocence of the wretched woman.

Wordsworth is successful enough in arousing sympathy for Martha in the minds of the readers. She is the poor victim of false and unjust accusation of a male dominated society. She is innocent; still she is suffering. The only voice that is incorporated to her is:

“Oh misery! Oh misery!

Oh woe is me! Oh misery!” (“The Thorn”, 65-66; 76-77; 241-42)<sup>7</sup>

And that reflects Wordsworth's typical pattern of portraying women. And the most interesting point to note is that in spite of all his sympathies, Wordsworth does not bestow her with the power to protect herself. A supernatural event takes place but it is attributed to nature instead of the fallen woman.

If Lucy is an isolated individual in the passion and imagination of the poet and under the constructive influences of Mother Nature, Martha Ray in “The Thorn”, although in utter isolation as she is estranged from the society, is in a much more disadvantageous position. This is, perhaps, because she has transgressed the social system by developing an illicit relationship with Stephen Hill. Although the relationship is something that cannot be approved by any conservative society and Martha Ray must be blamed for this, one thing that cannot be denied is the fact that her love for Stephen has always been true. The mental shock and the subsequent madness that she experiences after she is abandoned by Stephen are, certainly, attestations of her true love. Stephen, on the other hand, has betrayed Martha by deserting her on the day of their marriage and by being betrothed to another woman.

Wordsworth seems to have done injustice to Martha by drawing her to the last point of wretchedness. She is the one who suffers all the consequences of a sinful act whereas Stephen is relieved of his criminal act even from the imagination of the reader. The glaring contrast between these two treatments strike readers with a sense of disbelief. The gossip and speculations regarding Martha Ray go to the horrible point of killing her own illegitimate child. The entire village unites against her and arranges a mob justice to punish her.

At this point, the story takes a turn for the better. We experience a sense of relief and find a renewed interest realizing that Wordsworth's usual pattern of portraying women has yet been maintained once more. None but Nature herself comes to rescue the ‘fallen woman’. The supernatural event that takes place (the shaking of the mossy hill) makes the so called ‘justice seekers’ retreat.

This sudden intervention of Nature can have several interpretations. As Nature, for Wordsworth, is the ultimate moral teacher of man, a manifestation of God and “the anchor of my purest thought”, an act of Nature is actually an act of justification. It seems to be indicating that Martha Ray is not guilty of the sin that the villagers think she has committed. She is innocent; therefore, she draws all the sympathies of the readers. And that completes the circle that Wordsworth has planned for the miserable woman.

A close observation reveals that even here, the pattern of portraying women is not different from that of other poems. In “Tintern Abbey”, Dorothy's status seems to be nothing more than a silent listener. But as the poem approaches towards its end, Wordsworth is found to have placed her as his other self, a reflection of his own being:

thou my dearest Friend,  
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once,  
My dear, dear Sister! (116-122)<sup>8</sup>

And the rest of the poem is a kind of exhortation that Wordsworth makes to his sister. Dorothy's role in the poem experiences an elevation, a kind of growing in stature. Like Dorothy, Lucy in *Lucy Poems*, also, is devoid of speech. Throughout all the poems of this series, her existence is simply passive and mute. The glorification of Nature and the poet's intensity of passion are the two major aspects occupying the central role of these poems. In spite of all these, Lucy does not fail to draw readers' sympathy. She becomes an object of love for the readers and remains in their heart forever.

The character of Martha Ray follows the same pattern. We, because of our conservative frame of mind, cannot but blame her for corrupting the sacred institution of love by sacrificing her virginity. We even tend to suspect her of killing her own child. Her wretchedness seems to be quite justified. Wordsworth, too, participates in this condemnation by denying Martha Ray a voice (like Lucy or Dorothy); her only words, "Oh misery! Oh misery!/Oh woe is me! Oh misery!" ("The Thorn", 65-66; 76-77; 241-42)<sup>9</sup> are distinct and often mingle with howl of the wind. But as the story progresses, we begin to see Martha Ray in a different light. In spite of being true and committed to her lover, she bears the brunt of the betrayal. We realize that she is not supposed to be blamed for her misfortune. Immediately, she becomes an object of sympathy. When the supernatural event attests her innocence, she raises herself further in our estimation.

Wordsworth's view on women is reflected in his treatment of Nature also. Throughout the ages, Wordsworth has been appreciated as a true believer in an extraordinary power of Nature. To him, it is not only beautiful; it has also the power to influence human life in an unimaginable but positive way. Terms like 'Worshipper of Nature', 'Prophet of Nature' and so on are justifiably applicable to him. In those poems of his, where Nature is the centre of focus, his philosophy regarding women is not at all absent. Day (1996) in his *Romanticism* has discussed this issue in the most convincing way. In the chapter named "Gender and Sublime", Day has shown how Wordsworth's treatment of Nature is biased by the supremacy of masculine over feminine. To show this, he has first brought into discussion the theory of Edmund Burke.

Nature, for Burke, possesses both 'sublime' and 'beautiful' aspects. And they have their distinct impacts on the mind of man. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke, attempting to define the experience of sublime, "spoke of an experience of a power that exceeds the quantifiable and the usable (Day, 1996). This power evokes pain and terror rather than pleasure and love in our mind. The viewer is awe-stricken and what he feels can only be termed as 'terrifying thrill' which is the result of something grand and commanding. As examples of 'sublime' Burke has cited those that can produce an impression of infinity: "in natural phenomena and in human constructions, whose dimensions, particularly along the vertical line, are huge and grand: in the overwhelming mass of mountains or in deep dark caves, in soaring buildings, particularly ruins, or even in poetry (such as that in the *Old Testament* or in Homer) which celebrates the superhuman or the divine (Day, 1996). And the ultimate sublime object, for Burke, is God. As opposed to masculine gendering of sublime, things which are beautiful have been termed by Burke as feminine and are of a lesser order than sublime.

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<sup>8</sup> ibid

<sup>9</sup> ibid

In Wordsworth's poetry, sublime has always occupied the supreme position. In "Tintern Abbey" he is thankful to Nature for all its gifts-'sensations sweet' during the weary hours of city life in London, 'tranquil restoration' that passed into his mind and made it purer or feelings of 'unremembered pleasure' that made him perform 'acts of kindness and of love'. But above everything, he values most 'that blessed mood'- an 'aspect more sublime'.

In "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" the poet's appreciation works on two levels. He is enjoying and appreciating the sights and sounds of Nature. But amid this joy or happiness of May morning, her happiness seems to be disturbed by a sense of loss:

I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!  
-But there is a Tree, of many, one,  
A single Field which I have looked upon,  
Both of them speak of something that is gone;  
The Pansy at my feet  
Doth the same tale repeat:  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (51-58)<sup>10</sup>

The sublime aspects of childhood which he has glorified throughout the poem, is no longer there in his matured self. The superiority of sublime childhood over the 'feminine' beauty of Mother Nature is thus established. If we go by Burk's philosophy, we can interpret this treatment of sublime and beauty from a gender perspective. And that Wordsworthian pattern resurfaces again. There is that appreciation of feminine but when there is a question of awarding supremacy, it goes to the masculine sublime; to the child who is:

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie  
Thy Soul's immensity;  
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep  
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,  
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,  
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,-  
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!  
On whom those truths do rest,  
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,  
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave; (108-117)<sup>11</sup>

The discussion cannot be concluded without a reference to pantheism. The idea of pantheism gained through the writing of Wordsworth. This is the feature that has made his treatment of Nature exceptional- much different from that of others. When he looked on Nature, especially in his mature years, he felt 'a presence', 'a sense sublime'-

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (Tintern Abbey, 95-104)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ibid

<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> ibid

So, Nature was, for him, not only to gratify his senses and provide him pleasure; rather, it was, for him, endowed with a presence- a presence of something divine. That is why, it will not be wrong to say that the experience of Nature used to take him to the pinnacle of sublimity since a divine being, perhaps God Himself, used to be reflected in his eyes.

Thus pantheism is nothing but an indication of God's omnipresence in all objects of Nature. The glory and sublimity of God adds to the glory and sublimity of Nature and that was, perhaps, the reason why Nature provided a sublime spectacle to him. And since it is sublime, it is undoubtedly masculine. Nature, which is mere vegetation and is an epitome of beauty, is, in that case, feminine. Wordsworth never avoids this feminine nature, but his ultimate obsession lies with the sublimity of Nature which he worships.

### **Conclusion**

Romantic literature has always been enriched by the introduction of female figures in poetry. It is true that they have often been deprived of supreme positions. But it is also true that they have never failed to attract our attention and sympathy. And Wordsworth stands supreme in this regard. He has projected his women in such a way that although they do not maintain the dominance in terms of attitude but they are found to occupy the central position in the poems. So, Wordsworth has certainly done justice in that respect. Besides, it is undeniable that Romantic literature would have lost its flavour and charm if females and feminine qualities were not incorporated into the poetry of that time. They have not been portrayed to champion the cause of Feminism; rather they have been incorporated to facilitate the commencement of a new trend in literature as opposed to the insipid and non-Romantic creations of the earlier age. Although William Blake is credited as the pre-cursor of Romanticism, it is with Wordsworth that Romantic literature emerged completely as a literary tradition. And without the females and feminine characteristics, it would have never been possible.

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