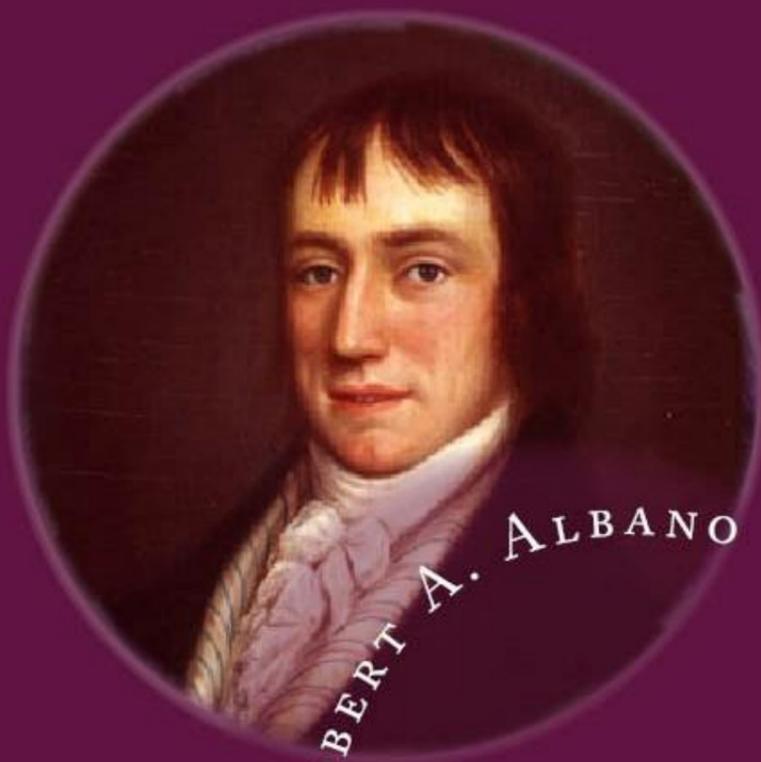


Understanding the Poetry of William Wordsworth



ROBERT A. ALBANO

UNDERSTANDING
THE
POETRY
OF
WILLIAM
WORDSWORTH

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by

Robert A. Albano

MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

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CHAPTER 1

WORDSWORTH AND THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

WORDSWORTH'S EARLY YEARS

William Wordsworth was most certainly one of the most influential of the Romantic poets. During the era of the Romantics in the early nineteenth century, Wordsworth wrote many great poems. Two of the best are “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” and “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.” These two poems reflect several motifs or ideas that are common to the Romantic poets, especially (1) a **reverence for nature** and (2) the **idealization of childhood**.

William Wordsworth was born in 1770 and died in 1850. His poetry often focused on the **relationship between man and nature**. Like all of the Romantic poets, his work shows a remarkable contrast to the literature of the previous era, the Neoclassic Age.

Where the Neoclassicists were organized or structured, orderly, and artificial in their approach, the Romantics were unlimited or boundless, free, and natural. Where the Neoclassicists placed an emphasis on **reason**, the Romantics emphasized **emotion**.

<u>Neoclassicists</u>	<u>Romantics</u>
organized, structured	unlimited, boundless
orderly	free
artificial	natural
Reason	Emotion

Wordsworth's poetry is also remarkable for being both **simple and complex** at the same time. Wordsworth presents **complex** ideas and philosophical concepts through a **simple** subject matter and language.

The second of five children, Wordsworth was born in northeast England in 1770. In 1778 Wordsworth's mother died; and his father, who had earlier been rather successful in business, found himself in debt. However, his father did manage to send young William to a good boarding school when the boy was nine years old. Prior to that, William received most of his education from his mother.

Disaster struck again for Wordsworth when he was thirteen years of age (in 1783). His father died. Wordsworth was fortunate, though, that his uncles became his new guardians; and they saw to it that Wordsworth continued his education at the boarding school

Wordsworth graduated at age 17 (in 1787) and then enrolled at Cambridge University. His guardians expected him to be a clergyman, a member of the church, when he graduated.

Before he graduated, the 20-year-old Wordsworth took a break from his studies in 1790 in order to take a

walking tour through the Alps, the mountain range in central Europe and ranging along the borders of Switzerland, France, Italy, Germany, and Austria. This experience with nature – among others – convinced the gifted scholar that the life of the clergy was not for him.

In 1791 Wordsworth graduated with honors from Cambridge. He then moved to London. A few months later Wordsworth moved again, this time to **France**. He fell in love with a French girl there. Her name was **Annette Vallon**.

In the following year (1792) Wordsworth and his girlfriend Annette had a child, a daughter whom they named Caroline. However, a lack of money as well as the growing tensions between England and France forced Wordsworth to return to England without his fiancé and daughter.

Wordsworth's experiences in the Alps became the subject matter for his first published work in 1793, *Descriptive Sketches*. The poet **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** hailed the work and lavishly praised Wordsworth as “the best poet of the age.”

Because of his ties to France, the years prior to the **French Revolution** were ones of great despair and suffering for Wordsworth. Wordsworth worried about the political crisis and how it was affecting Annette Vallon and his daughter Caroline.

Later, in 1797, with his sister **Dorothy**, Wordsworth moved to Somerset, in southern England. The time he spent there contributed significantly in restoring his mental

health. At Somerset Wordsworth became close friends to **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**. The two intellectual men shared a passion for poetry, and they influenced the writing of each other in numerous and profound ways.

PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS

In the following year, 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge produced a joint collection of poetry entitled *Lyrical Ballads*. Among other poems in this work is the highly regarded “Tintern Abbey.”

Lyrical Ballads was highly successful, and it entered a second edition in 1800 and a third edition in 1802. For the second edition, Wordsworth added a **Preface**. And in the 1802 edition he expanded that **Preface** even further.

This **Preface** today stands as what critics refer to as the pivotal turning point of English Romantic criticism. They also use the word “manifesto” to describe it. The word *manifesto* is often used in politics when a political party or organization wishes to declare its goals or principle guidelines or intentions. To call Wordsworth’s **Preface** a manifesto, then, suggests that it somehow collectively represents the unified thoughts of the Romantic poets. Nothing could have been further from Wordsworth’s intentions. The poet was not issuing any kind of political statement, nor was he suggesting that any type of organized movement enveloped the Romantic writers.

Yet, nevertheless, his **Preface** does encapsulate the **trends and development of poetry** in his age. The **Preface** examines the subject matter and language of poetry as well as addressing the question, “**What is a**

poet?” Although the **Preface** is too lengthy and complicated to examine adequately in this introduction, the student should be aware of some of the key concepts that appear in it.

KEY CONCEPTS OF THE PREFACE

(1) First, Wordsworth defines poetry as the **spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings**. Unlike the Neoclassicists, who kept their emotional voice in check, Wordsworth declares that an abundance of emotions forms the core of poetry. Such feelings exist within the poet as a result from his contact with nature, which exists outside or separate from the poet.

(2) Second, Wordsworth declares that poetry is **free from rules**. The poet is free to explore, bend, and even break the conventions of poetry. No established meters or rhythm need to be followed. And ideas or concepts can be explored as freely as rhythmical patterns.

(3) Third, **nature forms the primary subject matter** of poetry. And nature becomes, in a sense, a reflection of the poet's own **soul**.

(4) Fourth, ordinary items, everyday objects, the **commonplace are endowed with a special quality or glory**. The poet may esteem and honor a tree, a small stream, or even a little child. Such are wonderful and marvelous creations of nature.

(5) Fifth, the **beauty of nature contains a strange or even supernatural quality** that affects the beholder in a positive and spiritual manner.

One must keep in mind, though, that Wordsworth **was not establishing rules** here. He was merely recording his thoughts on the nature of poetry during his age – especially as it appears in his own poems and those by Coleridge.

Wordsworth, like all of the Romantics, believed in the **Individualism** of the poet. Poets should not conform to rules, and Wordsworth would definitely not want other poets to use his poems as inspiration for their own creations or to imitate his own style of writing poetry.

AFTER LYRICAL BALLADS

After the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was printed, Wordsworth also was able to settle his personal affairs. In 1802 Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy took a trip to France. There he met his former girlfriend and his ten-year-old daughter. William helped them out financially but the love that William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon once felt for one another no longer existed.

Later that same year, William Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson, a friend whom he had known since childhood. Their marriage was a successful one, and they had five children.

Wordsworth scholars generally point to the years from 1797 and 1807 as the period when Wordsworth wrote his greatest poetry. Of course, this time frame includes the poems found in *Lyrical Ballads*. And it also includes the “**Intimations Ode,**” which first appeared in 1807.

Several critics suggest that Wordsworth's poetry after 1807 does not measure up to that which he wrote earlier. However, Wordsworth's reputation as a great poet continued to grow over the next few decades.

In fact, as late as 1843, more than a decade after the Romantic movement had ended in England, Wordsworth was honored with the title of Poet Laureate. He was declared as the chief poet of England.

William Wordsworth died in 1850. He was the last survivor of the six truly great Romantic poets. Keats died in 1821, Shelley in 1822, Byron in 1824, Blake in 1827, and Coleridge in 1834. The final chapter on Romanticism was now at an end.

THE PRIMARY TOPICS OF WORDSWORTH'S POEMS

(1) First, Wordsworth viewed **nature as a teacher**. Nature instructs all of us when we are young and prepares us for our adult lives.

(2) Second, a **relationship exists between childhood and adulthood**. Wordsworth does not just mean this is the obvious sense. Rather, he points to a mystic or supernatural connection between these two distinct stages in life.

(3) Third, Wordsworth does believe that there is **meaning in life**, and such meaning can be apprehended or understood through a relationship with **nature**.

(4) Fourth, despite the positive affect of nature upon man, there also exists a **conflict between man and nature**. At times Wordsworth depicts nature as a mysterious or divine presence. It possesses a supernatural quality that surpasses the understanding of man. Thus, nature, although an object of beauty, may also be, at the very same time, an object of awe or even fear.

MOTIFS IN ROMANTIC POETRY

The reader of William Wordsworth's poetry should attempt to discover which of the motifs common to many romantic poets are included in Wordsworth's own work. There are primarily eight of these motifs to look for.

- 1. a reverence for nature**
- 2. nature's appearance is largely subjective, formed by the response of the human mind**
- 3. expressionistic imagery (images are not realistic but often represent the internal thoughts and moods of the speaker)**
- 4. the conflict between desire and the mundane world (not unlike a conflict between reason and emotion)**
- 5. a portrayal of the sensitive, alienated artist**
- 6. praise of the primitive**
- 7. the idealization of childhood**
- 8. the nature of genius**

Not all of these motifs will appear in Wordsworth's poems, but most of them do.

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