UNIT 3 : WILLIAM WORDSWORTH : “SIMON LEE”

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- familiarise yourself to the life and works of the romantic poet William Wordsworth
- explain the poem “Simon Lee”
- discuss the style and the language of the poem
- appreciate the poem in its totality.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the poem, “Simon Lee” by William Wordsworth (1770-1850), one of the greatest poets of the English Romantic movement. You may have read some of the poems written by him. He is perhaps the most celebrated and influential poet of the Romantic period of English literature. Together with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another Romantic poet and also his friend, he published the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. With the publication of this collection of poems commenced the period of

Romanticism in the history of English literature. Let me tell you, that the idea for bringing out this volume was conceived when Wordsworth and Coleridge were living as close neighbours in Somerset. The "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* is considered to be the official ***manifesto*** of the Romantic Movement. Here, the *Preface* is considered to be similar to an official statement of the principles of the Romantic Movement.



Manifesto : Policy or proposal, the principles laid down by Wordsworth and Coleridge for composing poems.

Wordsworth is primarily a poet of nature. For him, Nature is a living force. Nature is, in a sense,"a friend, philosopher and guide" to man. There is, according to him, a close relationship between man and Nature. He held the belief that Nature can never betray man. Wordsworth also acknowledged his deliberate choice of a "language really used by men", which is applied to "incidents and situations from common life".

In this unit, you will get a general idea about the life and works of William Wordsworth and an explanation of the poem prescribed. You will also get an elaboration of the poetic techniques employed, and the style and language used by the poet.

3.3 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: THE POET

As has already been mentioned, Wordsworth is the high priest of the English Romantic movement and the most celebrated poet among the English Romantic poets. Devoting himself largely to the treatment of Nature, he began a prolific literary career with *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and produced such immortal poems as "The Prelude", "The Excursion", "Lucy poems", "Michael", "Simon Lee" etc.

3.3.1 His Life

William Wordsworth was born in the year 1770 at Cockermouth in Cumberland on the edge of the Lake District, the third of five children of John Wordsworth. His beloved sister Dorothy Wordsworth, who was also a poet and a diarist, was born the year following his birth. Wordsworth was very close to his sister who was his companion through most of his life. Even though a silent partner, Dorothy was a great inspiration to her brother

William and also to Coleridge, his poet-friend. His mother died when he was only eight, and after his father's death, Wordsworth was looked after by his relatives who sent him to school at Hawkshead, in the picturesque Lake District region. Here the glorious bounties of nature taught him more than his school lessons could teach him. He lost himself amidst nature and began to feel the presence of some "Living Spirit" in it. Wordsworth has beautifully recorded his feelings in the poem "The Prelude" which is considered to be an autobiographical poem. You may read it if you want to know more about his poetic genius.

Wordsworth's years at St. John's College in Cambridge were quite different from his life at Hawkshead. He had spent happy years at Hawkshead but he found life at Cambridge very uninspiring and mechanical. During this period, he made two trips to France where he was greatly influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution. He, like most of the other Romantic poets, was politically conscious and believed in the motto of the French Revolution: *"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"*. Perhaps, you have already read about this motto in your history books. However, he was saddened and disappointed by the excesses of the Revolution, especially the beheading of Louis XVI. He, therefore, in his later stage, turned to Nature to find solace from the woes and worries of human life. And, as already mentioned he held the belief that Nature can never betray man.



Constraints : limitation, restriction, restraint
Poet Laureate : recognition as the best poet of the country.

Wordsworth had to face many hardships in his life and financial ***constraints*** never left him. Initially, his poetry also faced some criticism. But, he never lost faith in himself and patiently continued his work. His efforts were rewarded when he was hailed as the greatest poet that England had ever produced. He was also made ***Poet Laureate*** in 1843 on the death of Robert Southey. William Wordsworth passed away in 1850 and was buried in the churchyard at Grasmere.

The French Revolution (1789) is considered to be the bloodiest revolution in world history. It was a period of great social and political turmoil in the political history of France and Europe in general on account of the Revolution. The structure of the French government had undergone a radical change from absolute monarchy to political liberty, social equality and national patriotism. The aristocrats were executed on the guillotine and there was much bloodshed during the days of the Revolution. Though the republican ideals of the Revolution influenced Wordsworth, he was much repulsed by its violent character. The immediate motive of the French Revolution was to abolish the French monarchy.

3.3.2 His Works

Wordsworth was a ***prolific*** writer who brought out a great variety of works throughout his literary career. Let us list some of his major works. *The Lyrical Ballads*(1798) includes poems like "Simon Lee" (which we will deal with in this unit), "Lines Written in Early Spring", "Lines Composed A Few Miles AboveTintern Abbey" (which is an autobiographical poem written when he revisited the Wye area which filled him with a "tranquil restoration"), "The Thorn", etc. *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems* (1800) includes poems like "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" (which is the best-known of the *Lucy* poems), "Lucy Gray", "I Travelled Among Unknown Men", "Michael" and "The Two April Mornings".



Prolific: Productive, creative, fertile.

Poems, in Two Volumes (1807) include "Resolution and Independence", "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"or "The Daffodils" (which is a recounting of an experience with Dorothy when they chanced upon a "long belt" of daffodils), "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" (a deeply philosophical ode to childhood), "Ode to Duty", "The Solitary Reaper", "London 1802", "The World is Too Much with Us" (which is a sonnet criticising the material excesses of the modern world which has distanced itself from nature), etc. "The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind" is, of course, his most famous poem which is deeply autobiographical as I have mentioned earlier. Let us now look at "Simon Lee".



LET US KNOW

Wordsworth says in "My Heart Heaps Up"(The Rainbow Poem) : "The child is the father of Man". It is a characteristic Romantic idea that says that "youth" is richer in insight and wisdom than "age".



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1.What is the autobiographical poem written by Wordsworth?

Q.2. When was *The Lyrical Ballads* published? Why is this volume important?

Q.3. What kind of themes and language, can you say, are typical of Wordsworth?



Shire : county in England or Wales
Bandied : to toss back and forth
Husbandry :farming.
Tillage :the tilling of land.
Blither : happier.
Ere : before.
Chiming : musical ringing sound.
Bereft : deprived of something.
Kindred :one's family and relations.
Liveried :adj. of livery meaning dress. Liveried poverty means obvious poverty.
Awry : not in the right position.
Swoln :swollen.
Village Common :an area of common land in a village.
Prop :support.
Twenty Paces : twenty steps taken while walking.
Heath :an area of uncultivated land.

3.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

"Simon Lee"

In the sweet ***shire*** of Cardigan,
Not far from pleasant Ivor-hall,
An old Man dwells, a little man,—
'Tis said he once was tall.
Full five-and-thirty years he lived
A running huntsman merry;
And still the centre of his cheek
Is red as a ripe cherry.
No man like him the horn could sound,
And hill and valley rang with glee
When Echo ***bandied***, round and round,
The halloo of Simon Lee.
In those proud days, he little cared
For ***husbandry*** or ***tillage***;
To ***blither*** tasks did Simon rouse
The sleepers of the village.
He all the country could outrun,

Could leave both man and horse behind;
And often, ***ere*** the chase was done,
He reeled, and was stone– blind.
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!
But, O the heavy change! —***bereft***
Of health, strength, friends, and ***kindred***, see!
Old Simon to the world is left
In ***liveried*** poverty:
His master's dead, and no one now
Dwells in the Hall of Ivor;
Men, dogs, and horses, all are dead;
He is the sole survivor.
And he is lean and he is sick;
His body, dwindled and ***awry***,
Rests upon ankles ***swoln*** and thick;
His legs are thin and dry.
One ***prop*** he has, and only one,
His wife, an aged woman,
Lives with him, near the waterfall,
Upon the ***village Common***.
Beside their moss-grown hut of clay,
Not ***twenty paces*** from the door,
A scrap of land they have, but they
Are poorest of the poor.
This scrap of land he from the ***heath***
Enclosed when he was stronger;
But what to them avails the land
Which he can till no longer?
Oft, working by her husband's side,
Ruth does what Simon cannot do;

For she, with ***scanty*** cause for pride,
Is stouter of the two.
And, though you with your utmost skill
From labour could not ***wean*** them,
'Tis little, very little—all
That they can do between them.
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.
My gentle reader, I perceive
How patiently you've waited,
And now I fear that you expect
Some tale will be related.
O reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle reader! You would find
A tale in every thing.
What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it:
It is no tale; but, should you think,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.
One summer-day I chanced to see
This old Man doing all he could
To unearth the root of an old tree,
A stump of rotten wood.
The ***mattock tottered*** in his hand;
So vain was his endeavour,
That at the root of the old tree
He might have worked for ever.
"You're overtask'd, good Simon Lee,
Give me your tool," to him I said;
And at the word right gladly he
Received my proffer'd aid.



Oft : often.
Scanty :inadequate.
Wean :stop somebody.
Mattock : a tool like a pick axe.
Totter :be unstable.
Severed : cut off.

I struck, and with a single blow
The tangled root I ***severed***,
At which the poor old Man so long
And vainly had endeavour'd.
The tears into his eyes were brought,
And thanks and praises seem'd to run
So fast out of his heart, I thought
They never would have done.
— I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds
With coldness still returning;
Alas! the gratitude of men
Hath oftener left me mourning.



ACTIVITY 3.1

1. How many lines in the poem refer to Simon Lee's days of hunting?
2. Try to find out the reasons for Simon Lee's poverty.

3.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

The poem "Simon Lee" appeared in the *Lyrical Ballads*, with *a Few Other Poems* in 1798. Let us see what Wordsworth himself has to say about Simon Lee, the huntsman–

"'This old man had been huntsman to the squires of Alfoxden, which, at the time we occupied it, belonged to a manor. The old man's cottage stood upon a 'common', a little way from the entrance to Alfoxden Park. But it had disappeared. Many other changes had taken place in the adjoining village, which I could not but notice with a regret more natural than well-considered. Improvements but rarely appear such to those who, after long intervals of time, revisit places they have had much pleasure in. It is unnecessary to add, the fact was as mentioned in the poem; and I have, after an interval of forty-five years, the image of the old man as fresh before my eyes as if I had seen him yesterday. The expression when the hounds were out, 'I dearly love their voice', was word for word from his own lips."

So, you can see that this is a poem about an old huntsman whom Wordsworth actually encountered in his travels. There is an inherent narrative element in the poem.



Gentry : people who belong to a high social class.

Simon Lee, the old huntsman lives in Cardiganshire, a county in Wales. The poet-narrator tells us that he was once an active and strong man who was a fine huntsman whom no one could rival ("Full five-and-thirty years he lived/ A running huntsman merry"). Hunting, that is, chasing and killing animals for sport was a popular hobby among the ***gentry*** and in Britain, hunting mostly referred to the sport of hunting foxes. Simon's cry to urge on a chase echoed all throughout the hills and vales. ("When Echo bandied, round and round, / The halloo of *Simon Lee*"). He was not one to engage himself in farming and tilling; he would rather enjoy himself in the merrier pursuit of hunting. Neither man nor animal could rival him in his speed. And the sound of the barking hounds was music to his ears. (At which his heart rejoices; / For when the chiming hounds are out, / he dearly loves their voices!")

Alas! there is a change in his fortunes as he is stripped of "health, strength, friends, and kindred" and has to live in poverty now where he still wears the uniform of his earlier days, when he was an active huntsman. His feudal master, the men and animals are all dead and he is the sole survivor. Don't you think that this is a terrible predicament? Simon himself is frail and weak now, his body distorted and afflicted with ailments. Impoverished and childless, the poet says, his wife is his sole companion with whom he resides in a hut by the countryside. Although he owns a piece of land, yet the irony is that he can till it no longer because his ***afflictions*** do not allow him to do so. This is beautifully expressed in the lines– "This scrap of land he from the heath / Enclosed when he was stronger; / But what to them avails the land / Which he can till no longer?"



Afflictions : something that causes pain or suffering, especially a medical condition.
Arthritis: pain in the joints.
Yarn : story, tale.

It is Ruth, Simon's wife, who works alongside him. Although they involve themselves very hard, there is very little that they can produce. The older Simon grows, the more his ***arthritis*** troubles him. Here the poet intervenes and tells his readers that they may be expecting some kind of a ***yarn*** to

be narrated now. But he is of the opinion that although he has not much left to relate, his readers can make a tale out of it if they desire. ("It is no tale;/ but should you think,/ Perhaps a tale you'll make it"). The poet says this in order to stress the fact that there is indeed the germ of a story to be narrated.

One fine summer day the poet happened to see old Simon Lee trying to sever an old tree stump with a pickaxe. But all in vain. His painstaking efforts did not yield results. ("So vain was his endeavour, / That at the root of the old tree / He might have worked for ever.") Whereupon the poet offers to help him in his task and with a single fell shot splits apart the "the tangled root". Moved by this act of kindness, Simon Lee bursts into tears of gratitude and profoundly thanks the poet. This act of weeping reveals the innate honesty of the old man and in doing so, the poet gives us the lesson that men in general have become very pitiless. As the poet comments in the concluding lines of the poem, "I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds/With coldness still returning; / Alas! The gratitude of men / Hath oftener left me mourning."

The poem seems to justify the notion of gratitude against that of cold rationalism, i.e., the belief that one's actions should be based on scientific thinking rather than emotions or religious beliefs. The poem emphasises the contrast between the emotion of gratitude and the idea of rationalism. Wordsworth is of the opinion that there is no room for rationalism in the heartfelt thanks of Simon Lee. The tragedy and the infirmity of old age are the basic theme of the poem. Simon in his old age has been discarded although he had devoted himself whole-heartedly to his duties during his ***heydays.*** His loyalty to his master was never repaid and he now lives a very pitiful life. Wordsworth's poems are about the joys and the sorrows of common people, not of princes or heroes. In this poem, the poet draws our attention from the incidents themselves to the feelings, which give importance to the action. Here he includes the feelings not only of Simon Lee, but also those of himself. The poem is very thought- provoking in the sense that it makes us think as well as feel how even the humblest incidents of everyday life express the human condition. You may read the poem once again in order to fully grasp this notion.



Heyday: the time when someone or something was most popular, successful or powerful.

LET US KNOW



The English gentry took great pleasure in fox-hunting. It had increasingly become a favourite pastime of the upper classes. The foxes would be chased by numerous hunters and hounds until they died a painful death after many hours. The hunting hounds were bred for this very purpose and sometimes they tore the fox into pieces before eating them. Sometimes the head, tail and feet of the fox were taken away as trophies. But now animal rights activists are protesting against this bloody sport and campaigning to put an end to it.

QUOTE

- "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science." –Wordsworth's notion of poetry.
- Poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". Wordsworth's justification of his use of poetic diction.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4.Why did Simon Lee "not care for husbandry or tillage"?

Q.5. Why do you think did Simon Lee burst into tears of gratitude when the poet helped him in his task?

Q.6. What, do you think, is the underlying theme of the poem?

Q.7. "For when the ..... hounds are out". (Fill in the blank).

Q.8. "The ..... totter'd in his hand". (Fill in the blank).

Q.9. What is the "tale" given to us? Write an outline.

Q.10. How does Wordsworth use irony in the poem?

Q.11. Look at lines 1-4 of stanza 4 : Name the feelings expressed. Who is expressing them?



ACTIVITY 3.2

1. Which lines in the poem refer to the past in Simon's life? Which adjectives are used to describe the present? Do you think Simon Lee regrets the present?
2. "Simon Lee" is a ballad. Can you name some other ballads?



Contemplate: reflect, think, consider.

3.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Wordsworth believed that poetry should be written in the language of the common people because such language is not artificial and is more at ease with their environment. He believed that the purest poetry is written in the simplest language. "Simon Lee" is a good example of this belief. Since, his language is devoid of any ornamentation, its effect depends solely on its strength of feeling and imagination. In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, he asserts that "there neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of Prose and Verse".



Juxtapose: put side by side, contrast
Penury:poverty.

"Simon Lee" is such an astonishingly simple poem that you will be able to relate to it spontaneously and appreciate the essential feelings.But therein,lies Wordsworth's absolute genius because in his simplicity, there is a hint of complexity. He makes us ***contemplate*** the instinctive nature of the feeling of gratitude and also on man's general cold heartedness. This gives the poem its quiet intensity and sensitivity.

'Simon Lee' is a ballad, that is, it is a poem which tells a story in a number of short regular stanzas. It will be interesting to know that Wordsworth never wrote down his immediate impressions as poems. Rather, he let them sink into his mind where these impressions and feelings remained till they became clear. The poet believed that if he wrote down his immediate feelings, he would not be able to do justice to his composition. The poem "Simon Lee" was inspired by his encounter with an old huntsman, as mentioned earlier.

Wordsworth has effectively ***juxtaposed*** the present and the past in the poem. You can notice how he first describes the old Simon Lee as he lives in ***penury*** in Cardiganshire. ("In the sweet shire of Cardigan, / Not far

from pleasant Ivor Hall,/ An old man dwells, a little man"). Then he takes us to the past when Simon Lee was a strong and able huntsman whom no one could rival. ("He all the country could outrun, / Could leave both man and horse behind"). The past and the present are both important for the story.

You can notice that the poet interjects within into the narrative when he says, "My gentle reader, I perceive / How patiently you've waited,/ and now I feel that you expect/ some tale will be related." Also towards the end, the poet-narrator offers his aid to Simon Lee thus– "You're overtask'd, good Simon Lee, / Give me your tool,' to him I said." Wordsworth thus describes in the first person his feelings and sentiments regarding the whole incident.

We can also see traces of irony in the poem in the sense that, as Wordsworth says and as was mentioned earlier, Simon Lee never received his due for the services rendered during his youth. Through these lines, "One summer-day I chanced to see / This old man doing all he could / To unearth the root of an old tree, / A stump of rotten wood… So vain was his endeavour / That at the root of the old tree / He might have work'd for ever", Wordsworth tries to show us that the old huntsman is as close to the earth as the stubborn tree-root which he tries to uproot in vain.

Wordsworth, without trying to give us moral lessons and without being too suggestive, has given us a poem, which is lengthy, but at the same time full of feelings. The poem evokes deep thoughts in our minds and we are moved by the emotions which it gives rise to in our hearts. We agree with the poet when he says– "I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds / With coldness still returning; / Alas! the gratitude of men / Hath oftener left me mourning."



ACTIVITY 3.3

1. Read the poem and find the words related to hunting.
2. Explain the line: "O the heavy change!" Whose feelings are expressed here?

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Q.12.How does the language help you to understand the story in the poem?

Q.13. Show those lines in the poem which express the poet's feelings about Simon Lee's sense of gratitude?

Q.14. Explain the phrase "blither tasks".



3.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that Wordsworth was one of the eminent figures of the Romantic Movement in the history of English literature. He gave the highest value to Nature and found inspiration in her bounties. You have learnt about his life and works and also about his belief that Nature is a living force. It is called pantheism. "Simon Lee" is the narration of an encounter that the poet had with an old huntsman.

You have learnt about the poetic techniques employed by the poet and also how this poem is a reflection of "emotions recollected in tranquility". Besides this, you have also learnt that the language of poetry must be in keeping with the language of the common man, according to Wordsworth. The prescribed poem exemplifies this belief of the poet.



3.7 FURTHER READING

1) Daiches, David (2001). *A Critical History of English Literature*.Vol 4. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.

2) Legouis, Emile (1994). *A Short History of English Literature*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.

3) Long, W. J. (1997). *English Literature: Its History and Significance*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers.

4) Ousby, Ian (1992). *Companion to Literature in English*. London: Cambridge University Press.

5) Sarker, Sunil Kumar (2003). *A Companion to William Wordsworth*. New Delhi: Atlantic.

3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind

Ans to Q No 2: 1798 with the publication of this collection of poems commenced the period of Romanticism.

Ans to Q No 3: Nature

Ans to Q No 4: Simon was not one to engage himself in farming and tilling; he would rather enjoy himself in the merrier pursuit of hunting.

Ans to Q No 5: Refer to 3.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

Ans to Q No 6: Refer to 3.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

Ans to Q No 7: Chiming

Ans to Q No 8: Mattock

Ans to Q No 9: Refer to 3.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

Ans to Q No 10: Refer to 3.5 Style and Language

Ans to Q No 11: Refer to 3.4 Text of the Poem.

Ans to Q No 12: Refer to 3.5 Style and Language

Ans to Q No 13: Refer to 3.4 Text of the Poem.

Ans to Q No 14: It means happier tasks. (Elaborate)

3.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. What is the central idea of the poem "Simon Lee"?

Q.2. What does the poet mean when he says, ''When Echo bandied round and round, / The halloo of Simon Lee."

Q.3. Discuss the life and works of William Wordsworth

Q.4. How was Simon Lee in his youth and what is his present condition?

Q.5. "I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds / With coldness still returning; / Alas! the gratitude of men / Hath oftener left me mourning". Comment on these lines.

Q.6. Explain with reference to the context.

But O the heavy change! – bereft

Of health, strength, friends, and kindred, see!"

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