UNIT 2: WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- gain an idea on the form of romanticism and romantic poetry
- explain the life of the poet William Wordsworth
- discuss the major works of Wordsworth

2.2 INTRODUCTION

William Wordsworth (7th April, 1770 – 23rd April 1850) was a major English poet and one of the pioneers of English Romanticism. He was the Poet Laureate of Britain from 1843 until his death in 1850. Wordsworth published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 along with his friend and fellow Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and this marked the beginning of the Romantic Age in English Literature.

It is important to contextualize a poet or a writer and study his or her poetry in the backdrop of the historical and social setting. Thus, here it is required to know about the Romantic Age in literature to better appreciate Wordsworth's life and works.

Romanticism was a pan European movement, that is, it spread throughout Europe and was not limited to a certain country or place. As a movement sharing certain features, Romanticism was to be found mostly in Germany, France and England.It originated towards the end of the 18th Century and flourished during the first part of the nineteenth century. It occurred as a result of and in reaction against the values, critical norms and standard literary practice of the preceding age. Although, it manifested itself mostly in the arts and literature, Romanticism has had a lasting impact on history and politics and has shaped prevalent modes of thinking. Many of our conventional views regarding the poet or the author as an isolated brooding figure away from society are a contribution of the Romantic Age. There have been many attempts to define Romanticism but there is no consensus amongst scholars as to a standard definition and thus it is important for the student to note that the Romantic period as a term is used generally to define the literature of roughly the end of the 18th century and the first third of the nineteenth century that share a common historical situation. It is when literature moved in directions that were in marked contrast to the standard literary practice and values of the eighteenth century. The Romantic period is generally considered to have come to an end by about 1850 or earlier when it paved the way for another movement, Realism.

The age that preceded the Romantic Age was the 18th Century, also known as the Enlightenment or the Augustan Age. It was the age of reason and it advocated a rational and detached scientific approach to most human endeavours and dilemmas. The Enlightenment had developed and championed logic and reason above all other qualities and there was little room in this worldview for the emotion-based nature that would define Romanticism. According to the Enlightenment view, people and their relationships, roles, institutions, and indeed, their whole societies, could be understood best if organized and approached with a scientific perspective. During this time, it was believed that objectivity was not only desirable, but also achievable. Subjective emotions, contemplation of nature, and the creative impulse felt by individuals were denied any importance and only the Classical standards of order, harmony, proportion and objectivity were preferred.

Romanticism, then, emerged as a reaction against what was perceived to be a cultural climate that had been lacking in spontaneity, creativity, and

individuality. It emphasized on emotional and subjective spontaneity and highlighted the importance of individual feeling and imagination. The Romantics believed the imagination to be a source of creative faculty. Another important aspect of Romanticism is its distrust in society. Unlike the Enlightenment philosophers, the Romantics sought a "return to nature". The Romantic Age viewed nature with reverence and assigned an important role to nature in individual development and imagination. They went against the 18th century standard of viewing Nature scientifically and regarded it as a vital, living force capable of stirring powerful emotions in humans.

Romantic Poetry

Romantic poetry is thus the poetry that emerged in the Romantic Age and that which differed significantly in form and content to the poetry of the preceding age. English Romantic poetry is known for its six major poets with Wordsworth as the most towering figure among them. The others are William Blake (1757-1827), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), P.B. Shelley (1792-1822), John Keats (1795-1821) and Lord Byron (1788-1824).

The Augustan Age was called so because the writers of the age imitated the literature and culture of the reign of Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE). There was a revival of interest in the Classics and the authors sought to imitate classical forms. Their language was derivative and ordered and ornate and their relationship to nature was one of cautious imitation. They did not give in to the power of nature but sought to behold it through the lenses of reason and emphasized the importance of collective society rather than individualism. Emotion was subordinate to Reason, which was the prime source for inspiration.

The Romantics sought to lose the artificiality of that poetry and sought to communicate 'real events in simple language coloured by the imagination'. Nature was of prime importance and individual imagination was the prime creative faculty.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is the Romantic Movement?

Q2. Name the most famous Romantic poets along with Wordsworth.

Q3. What are the features of Romantic literature?

Q4. What is the age preceding the Romantic Age?

Q5. How does the literature of the Romantic Age differ from the preceding age?

2.3 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH : THE POET

Let us now discuss the life and works of this great Romantic poet.

2.3.1 His Life

William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumbria, a scenic region of England known as the Lake District. The magnificent surroundings created in him a sense of wonder and reverence for nature and kindled his poetic sensibilities and imagination. It is here amidst the simple country folk that Wordsworth spent much of his life and they had a lasting and profound influence on him as the common people was a major concern in his poetry. It is from them that he developed a faith in humanity and in the elemental things of life. He had four siblings but was closest to his sister, Dorothy, who played an important role throughout his life. Wordsworth was taught initially by his mother at home and his father too encouraged Wordsworth in his reading of Shakespeare and Milton. He then attended Hawkshead Grammar School and later went to St. John's College in Cambridge where he obtained his B.A in 1791. Towards the end of his final year, Wordsworth went on a walking tour through Europe and he came into contact with the French Revolution, an experience that influenced both his poetry and his political sensibilities. Wordsworth returned to France in late 1791 and resided there for about a period of thirteen months. It is here that he had a relationship with Anne Vallon, a French woman who gave birth to their child, Caroline in 1792. Due to financial constraints and Britain's rising tensions with France, Wordsworth returned to England alone but continued to support Anne and Caroline throughout his life. He married Mary Hutchinson in 1802 and they had five children together.

Wordsworth's meeting with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1795 is an important event in Wordsworth's poetic life and in the development of the

Romantic Age in England. It was with Coleridge that Wordsworth published the famous *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 which is considered the beginning of Romanticism in England. While the poems reflected the new direction that poetry and literature was about to take, it is the Preface to the Second Edition that makes the *Lyrical Ballads* so important to English Romanticism. In the Preface, Wordsworth outlines his theories of poetry which have come to be seen as the defining characteristics of the poetry of the Romantic period and the Preface can thus be seen as an unofficial manifesto of the Romantic Movement.

Wordsworth was made Poet Laureate of Britain in 1843 upon the death of Robert Southey. Wordsworth spent his final years settled at Rydal Mount in England where he died in 1850 on the 23rd of April.

2.3.2 His Works

It was in school at Hawkeshead that Wordsworth made his first attempts at poetry but he made his debut as a poet in 1787 when a sonnet by him was published in *The European Magazine*. His visits to France and considerable time spent there resulted in his first collection of poems *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* in 1793. A legacy of 900 pounds left to him by a friend in 1795 enabled Wordsworth to dedicate his life to writing full time. The year 1795 also marks the year Wordsworth met with Coleridge and they went on to publish *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 and this year has been taken to mean the beginning of the Romantic Age in England. This book contained some of their most well known poems including "Tintern Abbey" by Wordsworth and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge. The edition published in 1802 contained Wordsworth's Preface which is considered a central work of Romantic literary theory. 1795 is also the year when Wordsworth wrote his only play *The Borderers* and it was completed in 1797. However, it remained unpublished for a long time until it was finally published in 1842 with major revisions. Wordsworth travelled through Germany in 1798-99 with Dorothy and Coleridge and this trip resulted in many poems including his famous *Lucy* poems. Wordsworth's second collection of poems titled *Poems in Two Volumes* was published in 1807 and it contained his poetry written from 1787

to 1807 and also included the sonnet *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802* which will be discussed here in the next unit.

Wordsworth's most famous work is considered to be *The Prelude* on which he worked throughout his life and was eventually published three months after his death by his wife Mary in 1850. Some of Wordsworth's poetical works are "An Evening Walk" (1793), "Descriptive Sketches" (1793), "Intimations of Immortality" (1806), "The Excursion" (1814), "The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind" (1850), etc. Among his prose works mention may be made of *Literary Criticism* (1966), *Letters of Dorothy and William Wordsworth* (1967), *The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth* (1981), *Essay Upon Epitaphs* (1810), etc. to name a few.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6. Where was Wordsworth born?

Q7. Did his place of birth influence his poetry?

Q8. When did Wordsworth begin to write verses? Where was his first poem published?

Q9. When did Wordsworth meet Coleridge? Why is this important?



2.4 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed in detail Wordsworth's life and his contribution to English literature. While talking about Wordsworth and his poetry, we have also discussed salient aspects of the Romantic Age in English literature and how it influenced the literature produced during the period.



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

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



2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1 : Romanticism was a pan European movement. It originated towards the end of the 18th Century and flourished during the first part of the nineteenth century. It occurred as a result of and in reaction against the values, critical norms and standard literary practice of the preceding age.

Ans to 2 : William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, P. B. Shelley, John Keats and Lord Byron.

Ans to Q3 : The Romantics sought to lose the artificiality of that poetry and sought to communicate 'real events in simple language coloured by the imagination'. Nature was of prime importance and individual imagination was the prime creative faculty.

Ans to Q4 : The Augustan Age.

Ans to Q5 : The Augustan Age saw the revival of interest in the Classics and the authors sought to imitate classical forms. Their language was derivative and ordered and ornate and their relationship to nature was one of cautious imitation. They did not give in to the power of nature but sought to behold it through the lenses of reason and emphasized the importance of collective society rather than individualism. Emotion was subordinate to Reason, which was the prime source for inspiration but the Romantics sought to lose the artificiality of that poetry and sough to communicate 'real events in simple language coloured by the imagination'. Nature was

of prime importance and individual imagination was the prime creative faculty.

Ans to Q6 : William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumbria, a scenic region of England known as the Lake District.

Ans to Q7 : Yes, the magnificent surroundings established in him a sense of wonder and reverence for nature and kindled his poetic sensibilities and imagination.

Ans to Q8 : It was in school at Hawkeshead that Wordsworth made his first attempts at poetry but he made his debut as a poet in 1787 when a sonnet by him was published in The European Magazine.

Ans to Q9 : Wordsworth's meeting with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1795 is an important event in Wordsworth's poetic life and in the development of the Romantic Age in England. It was with Coleridge that Wordsworth published the famous Lyrical Ballads in 1798 which is considered the beginning of Romanticism in England.



2.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Does Wordsworth's poetry exemplify the features of Romantic poetry in contrast to the poetry of the preceding Age of Reason?

Q2. Why is the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* important to Romanticism in England?

Q3. What should poetic language be like according to Wordsworth and why?

Q4. What would you call the primary or the most important theme in Wordsworth's poetry?

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