UNIT 3: WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: LIFE AND WORKS

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

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

- read briefly about the life and works of William Wordsworth
- discuss certain basic features of English Romanticism through Wordsworth's poetry
- identify the themes that consist in the philosophy of Wordsworth as a poet
- make an assessment of Wordsworth as a poet of his time

3.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall try to discuss the life and works of William Wordsworth, one of the most important of the Romantic poets. Along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth helped to launch the Romantic Age in English Literary history with their joint publication *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). *The Prelude* is considered his magnum opus. It is a semiautobiographical poem of his early years, and he expanded the poem for a number of times. Wordsworth was England's Poet Laureate from 1843 until his death from in 1850. In this

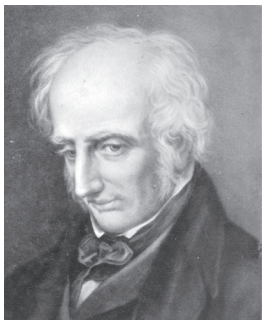
unit, an attempt has been made to discuss the life and works of the poet Wordsworth, which shall help you to read his poems in detail. Declaring in the preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry should be written in a "language really used by men," Wordsworth challenged the prevailing 18th century view regarding formal poetic diction and thereby profoundly affected the course of modern poetry. By the time you finish reading this unit, you will learn that freshness and emotional power of Wordsworth's poetry, the keen psychological depth of his characterizations, and the urgency of his social commentary make him one of the most important poets in the English language.

3.3 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: THE POET

The following subsections will guide you through the life and works of William Wordsworth.

3.3.1 His Life

William Wordsworth was born on 7th April 1770 at a town called Cockermouth, outside the Lake District. His father John Wordsworth was a lawyer by profession and he managed the estates of Sir James Lowther, later Earl of Lonsdale. His mother was Anne Cookson from Penrith. William was the second among the five children of the family. Richard was the eldest brother while the others were John, Christopher, and his sister Dorothy who was twenty months junior to him. William was deeply attached to his sister and she remained a major influence and inspiration in his poetic career. As a child, Wordsworth was of stiff, moody and violent temper, which caused much anxiety to his mother. The economic condition of the Wordsworths was not too sound as Lowther refused to pay William's father for his service, which eventually led to a lawsuit that got settled years after his



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death. William lost his mother at the age of eight. Five years later, when his father died, the family was left with little fortune and he had to depend largely on the generosity of his uncles for his livelihood and education.

William attended Anne Brikett's infant school at Penrith in the year of 1775 when he was staying with his mother's parents. Later, in 1778, he started going to Hawkshead Grammar School at a small village near the Esthwaite Water where he, along with other boarders, stayed with an old lady named Ann Tyson. His school life at Hawkshead happened to be a most cultivating period for him. Here, Wordsworth learned Latin and developed himself as a voracious reader.

He was admitted to St. John's College, Cambridge in the year of 1787. However, he was so well taught at Hawkshead that the curriculum at Cambridge seemed to be too inadequate to satisfy his academic curiosity. He did not like the restrictions at the University and worked the least in academic lines. However, he plunged himself deeply into the study of literature of his own choice. He could manage to get his BA degree from the university in January 1791 and thereafter left Cambridge with no specific intentions and plans for his future course of life. However, the days spent at Cambridge were going to play a major role in his life and in his poetic career as the echoes of the socio-political upheaval in France could be heard at Cambridge too. The young student's artistic mind was firmly committed to the celebration of human freedom as symbolised by the momentous event of the French Revolution. Later on, he wrote in *Prelude*

"…it was a time when Europe was rejoiced
France standing on the top of golden hours
And human nature seeming born again."

In 1791, he went to France and visited the Legislative Assembly and the remains of the Bastille. It was a thrilling experience to travel through Paris, which experienced most, fully the impact of the Revolution. During November 1791, he travelled

to Orleans and Blois where he fell in love with a surgeon's daughter called Annette Vallon. They did not get married, but spent the summer of 1792 together at Blois and in December 1792; Annette gave birth to a girl named Caroline. However, Wordsworth had already left for England before Caroline's birth and the outbreak of the war between England and France prevented him from going back to France to see his daughter. This separation from his beloved and the child filled his heart with remorse for a long time.

His stay at France and a trip to Switzerland helped him to come closer to the socio-political changes taking place around that time in Europe. In the summer of 1792, Wordsworth met Michel Beaupuy, an officer in the French regiment and an enlightened republican in French politics. In Beaupuy, Wordsworth found everything that he admired in the French Revolution and the conversations with this officer reawakened the egalitarian attitude that had been nurtured within Wordsworth's mind since his boyhood. Wordsworth sympathetically participated in Beaupuy's passionate belief in the beneficial change that the Revolution could bring about to the people of France.

After returning to England, Wordsworth started living a very unhappy and unsettled life for a couple of years. His first published works, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches,* which came out in 1793, were poorly received. The violent course of events in France broke his dreams of the transformation of the world into a new world of liberty. The war between England and France made him refigure his political loyalties and beliefs. During this period, he met Godwin, had frequent conversations with him and found himself totally captivated by his ideas, even though he could not agree to Godwin's insistence on the ascendance of reason over feelings.

In the year of 1795, Wordsworth settled with his sister at Racedown, near Crewkerne, in Dorsetshire. Here he finished *Guilt and Sorrow*, a poem sombre in tone and *The Borderers*, a tragedy.

These works did not bear the mark of his poetic merit, which he could not show until he completed *The Ruined Cottage*. At Racedown, he started corresponding with Coleridge, whom he first met at Bristol in August, 1795. Both admired each other's poems and soon their friendship started growing stronger through their shared interests. Wordsworth soon, in 1797, shifted himself with Dorothy to Alfoxden in the Quantocks in order to be near Coleridge. Both these poets had stimulating effect upon each other and they started working together. In 1798, they published a collection of poems called *Lyrical Ballads*, which is regarded as one of the most influential and path breaking moments in the history of English literature.

After the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Dorothy moved to Hamburg with the hope of learning German. However, they were not successful in learning this language. During these days, Wordsworth composed some of his well-known poems like *Lucy Gray*, *Ruth*, *Nutting*, *The Poet's Epigraph,* etc. *The Prelude,* his long autobiographical poem, was also started here. In December 1799, they returned to the Dove Cottage in Lake District in order to live there permanently and the days that followed were spent happily. In 1802, he married his cousin Mary Hutchinson. The years at Dove Cottage were the most fruitful period in his career as here he composed greater part of *The Prelude*, the first series of the Sonnets dedicated to liberty and some of his finest lyrics.

In 1813, Wordsworth moved to Rydal Mount where he spent the rest of his life. Life at Rydal Mount was apparently simple and uneventful, but prosperous. Wordsworth started earning a good living by selling his poetry. He became a frequent traveller and started touring all over Europe. However, this easy life was occasionally stirred by tragedies of losing some of the near ones, and misfortunes of friends and relatives. After Robert Southey's death, he was appointed the 'Poet Laureate' in the year of 1843. The last few days of the poet's life were spent in absolute

tranquillity. Being caught by a cold, he had to spend a few weeks in passive tranquillity until he drew his last breath on 23rd April 1850. Following his wish, he was buried in the churchyard at Grasmere.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the factors that helped Wordsworth develop an intimate connection with Nature in his early days?

Q 2: How did his return to England from France influenced Wordsworth's sensibility as a poet?

3.3.2 His Poetic Works

From his school days, Wordsworth showed a natural talent for poetry and the teachers at school encouraged him for composing poems. One of the earliest poems that the poet composed in his youthful days is "The Vale of Esthwaite". This is a long poem comprising several hundred lines; but only parts of it could be recovered from the notebooks. "An Evening Walk" (1793) is another long poem written one or two years after the composition of "The Vale of Esthwaite". These two poems show a gradual shift of the emerging poet's concern from the gothic elements to the pictures of landscapes and rural incidents. Another important poetic work of his early career, "Descriptive Sketches", was composed in 1792 in France and published in 1793. The poem commemorates a walking tour in the Alps through the patchy pictures of his wanderings, romantically conceived descriptions of Swiss chalet-dwellers and praise of the revolutionised France.

Poems like "Guilt and Sorrow"; "The Borderers" written in the period between 1792 and 1797 reflect the poet's tortured state of mind. This gloomy mental state was attributed to his sense of

growing injustice that he witnessed in his society. “Guilt and Sorrow” is a distinctively morbid attack upon the social order of the time. “The Borderers” can be read as a tragedy and it deals with some problems of criminal psychology. The poem also marks the traces of the earliest inclinations of Wordsworth towards the discussion of Nature and man. “The Ruined Cottage” is regarded as the most important poem of this period. It is a poem of poverty, sorrow and death where the poet is able to maintain an objective distance from the object of his concern. Of all poems written before 1797, only “An Evening Walk” and “Descriptive Sketches” were published. The common element among these poems was that they were reflective of the poet’s direct observation of Nature and human life.



LET US KNOW

The decade from 1797 to 1807 happens to be the most productive phase of Wordsworth’s poetic career. In the autumn of 1798, ***Lyrical Ballads*** was published. The publication of this volume containing poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge is regarded as a path breaking moment in the history of English literature. This collection included some parts of his earlier compositions along with a few delightful lyrics like “I heard a thousand blended notes”, “It is the first mild day of March”, “Expostulation and Reply” and the most celebrated long poem called “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey”. However, the collection also included, as the title suggests, a few ballads too. The language in these poems is simple, with most of the words being taken from everyday usage and colloquial language; even many of his ballads are partly made of conversations.

In 1798, Wordsworth composed “Peter Bell”, a rival and reply to Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner”, but published long after two

decades, in 1819. The poem tells the story of Peter Bell - a hardened ruffian - who is frightened into becoming a 'good and honest man' by a process of purely natural visitations. This poem can be treated as a study of human psychology when the poem tries to maintain his thesis that Nature is capable of influencing for good even one of her most rebellious and insensitive children.

Among his early lyrics, the "Lucy Poems" are regarded as most famous. Wordsworth composed most of them in 1799 during his stay with his sister in Germany. These poems show the gradual cultivation and development of certain defining features of Wordsworth's poetry such as the mode of expression in a tender personal tone soaked with emotion at the best, purest and strongest form etc. These poems open up a new set of images and references that deal with birds, flowers, stars, and the smaller and prettier details of nature. These poems, though not regarded as 'nature poems' like some of his later poems, motivate the poet's journey towards a deeper engagement with the world of Nature that results in his later works like "The Daisy", "The Daffodils", "The Cuckoo", "The Celandine" etc.

The Prelude, one of his most celebrated poems, was started in 1799 and some passages like "There was a Boy" and "Nutting" had already been published along with the *Lyrical Ballads* before the first version of it got completed in 1805. However, the poem was published after his death in 1850. As the subtitle of the poem "The Growth of a poet's Mind" suggests, the poem can be treated as a kind of subjective autobiography of the poet. F. W. Bateson (*Wordsworth: A Reinterpretation*, London: Longman, Green & Co, 1954, p. 165) comments that, "It is written, as it were, from the inside outwards. The frame of reference, that is, around which it is organised, lies deep down in Wordsworth's mind. The names, dates and places, that occur in it, and give an illusion of objective autobiography, are really subordinate to a private calendar and a geography of Wordsworth's own that has only relationship to the time and

space of the world as we know it". *Poems in Two Volumes,* published in 1807, is the next major publication after *Lyrical Ballads*. This volume contains masterpieces like the "Immortality Ode", "Resolution and Independence", "Ode on Duty", "Elegiac Stanzas", "The Happy Warrior", "The Daffodils", "To the Daisy", besides sonnets like "National Independence and Liberty" and "Memorials of Tour in Scotland". These poems, despite their difference in themes and time of composition, share a common determination on the part of the poem to make the best of things and his lament at the loss of the easy spontaneous joys and passion of the youthful days.

After 1807, there can be seen a gradual decline in Wordsworth's poetic power. *The Excursion,* published in 1814, is a notable work in two Books composed between 1809 and 1813. Towards the end of 1814, Wordsworth composed two remarkable poems - "Dion" and "Laodamia" - in a new style inspired by his reading of Virgil. His decline became clearly visible after 1814 but he still continued writing. The next few works included chiefly the memorials of his tours and different sonnets.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are the ideas conveyed through poems like "Guilt and Sorrow", "Boarders" and "Ruined Cottage".

Q 4: State briefly the significance of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Q 5: Do you find anything significant in Wordsworth's "Lucy Poems"?

3.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF WORDSWORTH AND HIS POEMS

Most of the critics of Wordsworth have made his treatment of nature, his use of diction, and his critical theories the centre of debates.

Early responses to his poetry begin with Francis Jeffrey's intensive drive to spoil Wordsworth's poetic career. His reviews of the works of the Lake poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey—and of Wordsworth's poetry in particular, were so spiteful that they stalled public acceptance of the poet for some 20 years. To Jeffrey, Wordsworth's poetic innovations were in "open violation of the established laws of poetry." He described Wordsworth's stylistic simplicity as affectation. In similar vein, Thomas De Quincey wrote of Wordsworth in 1835 that "Up to 1820 the name of Wordsworth was trampled underfoot; from 1820 to 1830 it was militant; from 1830 to 1835 it has been triumphant."

Early attacks on Wordsworth in the *Edinburgh Review* and by the anonymous author of a parody, *The Simpliciad* (1808), were followed by criticism and satire by the second generation of Romantics; like Byron and Shelley who mocked Wordsworth as 'simple' and 'dull.' John Keats distrusted what he called the 'egotistical sublime', and Hazlitt, and later Browning, deplored him as 'The Lost Leader', who had abandoned his early radical faith. However, such critical views were almost counterbalanced by the enormous and lasting popularity of works, inviting regards from writers such as Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill with almost religious veneration. They viewed Wordsworth's works as an expression in an age of doubt of the transcendent in nature and the good in man.

Like Francis Jeffrey, many others also believed Wordsworth to be 'descending too low' in his writing, as the advertisement printed with the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 warned. In the advertisement, Wordsworth clearly stated that many of his poetic undertakings might not be what poetry readers usually prefer. Therefore, many try to frame Wordsworth's poetic inclusion of ordinary language as only an "experiment" that attempts "to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." Despite this public hesitation, Wordsworth's poetry eventually gained acceptance. By the 1830s, Wordsworth could become England's preeminent poet.

Regarding his *The Excursion,* scholar Annabel Patterson wrote in a journal called *The Wordsworth Circle* that *The Excursion* "has a history

of disappointing its readers." Patterson goes on to describe how Wordsworth's literary contemporaries reacted negatively to the volume and expected far more. Yet other critics have viewed *The Excursion* like his other works, as poetic song or even a "song of daily life," in the words of scholar Brian Bartlett. Bartlett remarks on Wordsworth's distinct combination of "man's music and nature's music." William Wordsworth is considered the preeminent poet of nature, though he claimed his main subject was "the Mind of Man—/ My haunt, and the main region of my song." He portrays suffering humanity in many of his poems, showing a variety of causes: poverty, separation, bereavement, neglect. As Geoffrey Hartman has written, "those famous mis-readers of Wordsworth who say he advocates rural nature as a panacea should be condemned to read The Excursion once a day."

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was published shortly after his death. Although the poem was started quite early, Wordsworth completed the poem in 1805 and then drastically revised over time. Greeted with uneven praise at its first appearance, the poem is now hailed as Wordsworth's greatest work. Scholar Alan Richardson notes that because of the work's autobiographical slant, many literary critics view *The Prelude* through a variety of lenses, most specifically the psychoanalytic. At the same time, some critics tend to explore the poem through historical criticism, preferring, to see how Wordsworth engages with contemporary events at the local level on a broader canvas." In this vein, some scholars like to analyse the way Wordsworth may "position himself as a historical figure." Over all, the blending of autobiography, history, and epic, the theme of loss and gain, its mythologizing of childhood experience, and its affirmation of the value of the imagination have been praised by critics.

Wordsworth's *Poetical and Prose Works,* together with Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals,* (ed. W. Knight), appeared in 1896, and his *Poetical Works* in 1940-9 and 1952-4. *Letters of the Wordsworth Family 1787-1855* were edited by W. Knight in 1907, and *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* (ed. de Selincourt) appeared in 1935-9. His biography by M. Moorman was published in 1968 in 2 volumes, and a long-lost collection of letters between Mary and William appeared as *The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth* (1982).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How did the second generation of Romantic poets as well as the Victorian poets receive Wordsworth and his poems?



3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the life and works of William Wordsworth in some detail. From the reading of the different sections of this unit, you must have gained important ideas on the upbringing of Wordsworth as an important Romantic poet in the history of English literature, besides having a fair enough idea regarding his poems. A great innovator, he permanently enlarged the range of English poetry, both in subject matter and in treatment, a distinction he would not himself have accepted. It has been almost unanimously accepted that Wordsworth was a quintessential Romantic poet. You have learnt that the Romantic Movement of the late 18th century was a reaction against the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment period. Because, during the Enlightenment, developments in science and technology ushered in the massive social change in the Western society. The Industrial Revolution brought about population explosions in European cities while the works of political scientists and philosophers laid the groundwork for the American and French Revolutions. The Romantics like William Wordsworth often shared sceptical views of the progress brought by science and technology, and instead stressed the beauty of nature and individual emotion in their works. While analysing Wordsworth critically, this background needs to be kept in mind.



3.6 FURTHER READING

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3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: As a boy he used to explore the hills and dales of the region… …this attachment with nature conditioned the development of his emotional, intellectual and aesthetic sensibility… …this also helped him realise the intimate bond between Man and Nature which remains one of the most prominent themes of his poetry.

Ans to Q No 2: The violent course of events in France broke his dreams of transforming the world into a new world of liberty… …The war between England and France made him refigure his political loyalties and beliefs… …Godwin inculcated in him an insistence on the ascendance of reason over feelings.

Ans to Q No 3: "Guilt and Sorrow" is a morbid attack on the social order of the time… … "The Borderers" deals with some problems of

criminal psychology… …"The Ruined Cottage" is a poem of poverty, sorrow and death.

Ans to Q No 4: The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 is a landmark event in the history of English literature… …it expounded Wordsworth's philosophy as a poet… …it also justifies Wordsworth's use of words taken from everyday usages and colloquial language in most of his poems.

Ans to Q No 5: The "Lucy Poems" show the gradual cultivation and development of certain defining features of Wordsworth's poetry such as the mode of expression in a tender personal tone soaked with emotion at the best, purest and strongest form etc. These poems open up a new set of images and references that deal with birds, flowers, stars, and the smaller and prettier details of nature. These poems, though not regarded as 'nature poems', motivate the poet's journey towards a deeper engagement with the world of Nature.

Ans to Q No 6: Byron and Shelley mocked Wordsworth as 'simple' and 'dull'… … John Keats distrusted what he called the 'egotistical sublime' in Wordsworth… …Hazlitt, and later Browning, deplored him as 'The Lost Leader'… …Against such views, Victorians like Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill praised Wordsworth with almost religious veneration and they viewed Wordsworth's works as an expression in an age of doubt of the transcendent in nature and the good in man.



3.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: How do you connect Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature to his idea of imagination? Address your analysis with reference to some of his poems including "Tintern Abbey" where nature predominates.

Q 2: How did the friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge get reflected in the *Lyrical Ballads*? Discuss.

Q 3: Write an essay on how some of the poems of Wordsworth demonstrate how he was influenced by the French Revolution.

Q 4: What are some of the greatest achievements of Wordsworth as a Romantic poet? Write a note on the critical reception of William Wordsworth.

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