UNIT 9: WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: *PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS*

UNIT STRUCTURE:

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 William Wordsworth: The Critic (His Life and Works)

9.4 Wordsworth: *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

9.5 Important Concepts of the Text

9.6 Reception of Wordsworth as a Critic

9.7 Let us Sum up

9.8 Further Reading

9.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.10 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- contextualise *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* in the history of English criticism
- understand the role of Wordsworth in the development of Romanticism in English literature
- distinguish the basic concerns of the Romantic period from the Neoclassical
- explore the themes like poetic diction, poetic creation, imagination as expressed by Wordsworth
- evaluate Wordsworth as a literary critic

9.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Though Wordsworth is more popular as a poet than as a critic, he has made a seminal contribution to the development of Romantic literary criticism through his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. As a major Romantic poet, Wordsworth, along with S. T. Coleridge, is regarded as

the founder of the Romantic Age in English literature. The publication of their joint volume of poetry *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 is a groundbreaking moment in the history of English literature as it challenged many established norms about the object, subject matter and the language of poetry. Wordsworth's *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads* was a defence against the vehement criticism posed by a section of the contemporary critics. Though Wordsworth was not a critic, both by temperament and training, his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* came to be called the 'manifesto' of English Romantic criticism because of the fact that this essay explained quite clearly most of the basic concerns of Romantic literature in England. Besides, the stance he took against the neo-classical notion of poetic diction is unprecedented among his contemporaries. Apart from this, Wordsworth indulges in the age-old debate of understanding the function of poetry and the poets in human societies. All these considerations make the *Preface* an important document in English literature. This unit shall provide you with some basic information and understanding of the text. Try to relate what you learn with the socio-cultural and political context of the work. You can follow the books mentioned below in this unit as part of your exercise.

9.3 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: THE CRITIC

In Unit 3 of Block 1 of the previous Course, we have read about the life and works of William Wordsworth in sufficient detail. However, to help you recollect some of the important aspects of Wordsworth's life and works, we shall, in this section, only touch upon the important milestones in Wordsworth's life and works.

Wordsworth was born on 7th April 1770 to John Wordsworth and Ann Cookson in Cockermouth, the Lake District. His early childhood experience with the world of nature conditioned the development of his emotional, intellectual and aesthetic sensibility. His imaginative explorations and revisits of these childhood experiences helped him realise the intimate bond between Man and Nature, which remains one of the most prominent themes of his poetic exercise. Wordsworth's early

education and introduction of poetry was done by his father. He, despite being rarely at home, introduced William to the poetry of Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser, and allowed him to use his own library. William used to spend a good many hours reading in the library.

William made his debut as a poet in *The European Magazine* in 1787 by publishing a sonnet. He got admitted to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1787 and came out after being awarded the B.A. degree in 1791. He developed the habit of travelling to different places famous for their beauty and landscape in his holidays. He went on a walking tour in 1790 across Europe and extensively travelled through the Alps along with visiting the nearby areas of France, Switzerland, and Italy. 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.

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 Works,* 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 mesmerized with his ideas. However, Wordsworth could not reconcile his idea of the actuality of life with Godwin's insistence on the ascendance of Reason over feelings.

In 1795, he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Somerset and they would soon become close friends. Wordsworth moved to Alfoxton House at Somerset along with his sister Dorothy. Their new home would be just a few miles away from Nether Stowey where Coleridge lived. Both friends together published *Lyrical Ballads* in the autumn of 1798, which would later prove to be an important catalyst in the development of Romanticism in English literature. Wordsworth terms his poems published in this volume as some 'experimental' works of poetry in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads". The publication of this volume 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, often non-poetic. Most of the words are taken from everyday usages and colloquial language; even many of his ballads are partly made of conversations. His “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” was attached with the second edition of the book published in 1800. The “Preface” was edited and augmented significantly in the 1802 edition. Considered a central work of Romantic literary theory this “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads”* offers a detailed discussion of what Wordsworth believes as the elements of a new type of poetry, which would be based on the “real language of men” and which would avoid the poetic diction of much 18th century poetry.

Wordsworth was awarded with an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree from Durham University in 1838 and from Oxford University in 1839. He was awarded a civil list pension amounting to £300 a year by the government. After the death of Robert Southey in 1843, Wordsworth was offered the honour of being the Poet Laureate.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write a short note on *Lyrical Ballads*.

Q 2: Why is Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is so significant?

9.4 WORDSWORTH: *“PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS”*

We have already come to know that the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads”* was attached to the second publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, and was later substantially modified in the 1802 edition of the

volume. It was further edited in the 1815. This "Preface" later came to be regarded as the 'manifesto' of English Romantic criticism because it had commented on some of the vital issues connected to poetry and its relation to man, nature and the poet himself. Wordsworth, neither by temperament nor by training, had the qualification to be a critic. He was dragged into criticism by the vehement attack he witnessed by the neo-classical critics of the Edinburgh and the Quarterly Reviews on the poems published in his *Lyrical Ballads.* He had to take to writing criticism in sheer self-defence. In all of his publications as parts of the "Preface", Wordsworth concentrated on the subject of poetic diction and his view of poetry.

In the very first paragraph itself, Wordsworth clarifies to the readers of *Lyrical Ballads* that it was published as an 'experiment' to ascertain a sort of 'pleasure' that 'a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart' by using the 'real language of men in a state of vivid sensation'. Wordsworth expresses his satisfaction with the experiment as he observes that a greater number of readers have liked his poems in the volume than he expected. What he thinks about the volume is that it consists of a class of poetry well adapted to 'interest mankind permanently' and important in the quality and multiplicity of its 'moral relations'. In this context, the "Preface" is a defence of the theory upon which the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* were written.

The primary objective of Wordsworth behind the "Preface" was to establish, as he showed through the poems in the volume, incidents and situations drawn from common life as the subject matter of poetry. The other important objective was in terms of the great innovation he had made in *Lyrical Ballads* in the language of poetry. Rejecting poetic diction of the Neo-Classicists, he attempted to use the language 'really used by men'. The "Preface" offers his justifications behind such a revolutionary 'experiment' to examine whether the conversational language used by people from the middle and lower social classes can be employed fruitfully in poetry. Apart from his take on the choice of language, the most important objective of the "Preface" was to offer a definition and his conception of Poetry. He proposed his views on the nature and functions

of poetry and the basic qualities required in a true poet. From the point of view of the nature of poetry, Wordsworth holds that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Poetry originates from the internal feelings of the poet; it is a matter of passion, mood and temperament. A poet cannot produce poetry by strictly following the rules and norms laid down by the Classicists. Poetry has to flow out spontaneously from the soul of the poet. Good poetry is never the result of an immediate expression of the powerful emotions felt by the poet; it is the result of deep and long meditation by the poet pondering over such powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion 'recollected in tranquility.'

Another important aspect of the "Preface" is its attempt to define imagination and its role in aesthetic creativity. Wordsworth is one of the forerunners in the development of imagination is a creative agent in literary criticism. The neo-classical literary theory considered the human mind as a passive agent whose function is limited to the recording of sense impressions. Imagination was considered not more than a mode of memory that may bring images from recorded impressions of the memory. Imagination was also thought to be the agent that can link together different impressions and form images of objects or things that do not exist in reality. Rejecting such a limited scope allowed to Imagination, Wordsworth along with the other Romantics like Coleridge placed Imagination at a much higher position. For the Romantics, Imagination has higher creative faculty that allows the human mind to see and understand the world beyond the material compositions.

Another important point of discussion in the "Preface" is the theme and subject matter of poetry. Wordsworth argues that any subject that can 'interest the human mind' is eligible to be treated poetically. Wordsworth extends the scope of poetry, by incorporating themes chosen from lives of the rustic, humble and common people. Because the rustic people live close to nature far away from artificiality and vanity, their language becomes more expressive of the vital truths of life. Thus, for Wordsworth, the incidents and situations from common life,

expressed in the language really used by men, can be the worthy subject matter of poetry. Wordsworth further indulges in the debate over the function of poetry in the "Preface" and adheres to the views that poetry is for 'life's sake'. Poetry, as he asserts, "is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, the impassioned expression that is in the countenance of all science". Poetry, for Wordsworth, is the moral guide who imparts moral lessons in a delightful manner. In this stance, he does not deviate much from the classicists' view of the function of poetry. Now let us discuss the chief themes and concepts of the essay.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What does Wordsworth state about the primary objective of the *Lyrical Ballads*?

Q 4: What, according to Wordsworth, should be the subject matter of Poetry?

9.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

Wordsworth's attack on Poetic Diction

Throughout the history of English literature, there have been various debates over the suitable language of poetry in different ages. Wordsworth also wrote substantially on what he believes to be the proper language of poetry. Actually, he was compelled to write his "Preface" chiefly because of this debate. His take on poetic diction was an utter rejection of the neo-classical idea of poetic diction.



LET US KNOW

Poetic Diction:

The issue of poetic diction has been a topic of debate in English literature right from the days of Chaucer. It achieved intensity in the time of Spenser when with the inspiration of Renaissance new modes of linguistic expression were being developed and a learned treatment of the vernacular came into

vogue. Poetry came to be treated seriously and the important poetry in an important language needed a refined diction. However the vocabularies used by different poets like Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Thomson, Collins, Gray in successive years problematise the issue. Spenser preferred the archaic language to the popular diction in his time. Milton cherished a liking for the uncommon in word and phrase.

There can be noticed two types of protests against poetic diction in the history of western literatures; the first one being that of the classicists voicing against pedantry and affectation and advocating the use of polite learned words while the second one being that of the romantics advocating for the native, primitive and the passionately and directly spoken words. Wordsworth remains a pioneer in the second category in English literary history.

In the *Advertisement* of the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, Wordsworth stated that his chief aim behind adopting a simple diction for his poems was 'to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society was adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. He feared that his audience would find him 'too low' or 'too familiar'; but he was confident that his style would be a contrast to 'the gaudiness and inane phraseology of the modern writers'. When he, along with his friend Coleridge, was vehemently attacked by a section of the readers adhering to the conservative notions of poetic diction, Wordsworth had to give his tentative experiment the shape of a definite concept. In the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, he tried to explain his theory in the "Preface". He argues that the principal objective in the poems published in the volume, 'was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.'

Explaining why only 'low and rustic' life was chosen for this purpose, Wordsworth states that in that condition, " … such men hourly

communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple unelaborated expressions." Thus, remaining free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience in a language, which is "more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation."

Thus, Wordsworth raises his doubt over the established norms of diction by attacking different elements like personification, periphrasis, inversion etc used commonly by the poets of his time. "The reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and are utterly rejected as an ordinary device to elevate the style and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language…There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it….to bring my language near to the language of men." Within the scope of poetic diction, besides the common use of personification, Wordsworth includes "phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of poets", which can be understood as periphrasis, inversion, antithesis, and other devices and even those expressions, "in themselves proper and beautiful", but so frequently repeated and overused by bad poets that they arouse nothing but disgust in the mind of the reader.

Wordsworth further clarifies that according to his concept of poetic style, the language of poetry cannot be materially different from that of

prose: “that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose; but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well written.” As an instance, he offers the example of some lines from one of Gray’s sonnets “On the Death of Richard West”, which he considers to be the best lines in the poem, and where, in spite of that the poet Gray’s insistence on the difference between the language of poetry and prose, are hardly different from what they would be in prose:

A different object do these eyes require;
My only anguish melts no heart but mine;
And in my breast the imperfect joys expire;
…… ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. ….. …..
….. …… …… …… ….. ….. ….. ….. …. ….. …..
I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain

Wordsworth thus concludes that, “there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.” However he anticipates possible objection that rhyme and metre would constitutes a distinction between the language of prose and metrical composition, he offers his reply beforehand, “the language of such poetry as is here recommended is, as far as possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feelings, will of itself form a distinction far greater than composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and if metre be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude (i.e. distinction) will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind.” However, this expression indirectly makes him admit that there is a distinction between the language of poetry and that of prose or ‘the very language of men’, and that the distinction lies not only in metre but also in the choice of words and phrases, which in the case of poetry

must be made 'with true taste and feeling'. Thus, apparently, Wordsworth negates what he himself tries hard to promote in the name of the language of poetry.

There have been raised a lot of critical questions over the success of Wordsworth's attack on the neo-classical idea of poetic diction. With his emphasis on the selection of words 'with true sense and feeling', Wordsworth actually gives way to the possibility of what Johnson called 'flowers of speech' arising in the process: 'for, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures.' Here, Wordsworth falls prey to his own trap; he succumbs to the same notions he thinks of rejecting. By talking about the vulgarity of common speech refined by taste, and dignity and variety added to it by metaphors and figures, while being used in poetry, Wordsworth fails to raise his protests. He comes back to the same old tradition; as Rene Wellek says, 'Wordsworth actually ends in good neo-classicism.' In fact most of his successful poems like "Tintern Abbey", "The Immortality Ode", "The Solitary Reaper", and many others are not written 'in a selection of language really used by men' but in a language well refined in intellectual artistry.

Wordsworth's Definition of Poetry

The discussion on the nature of the suitable language of poetry leads Wordsworth to critically address the very idea of poetry itself. He defines good poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. In his discussion on the idea of poetry, it becomes evident that his assertions are not very clear. We shall discuss this point elaborately here. His initial definition of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' implies that there can be no difference between poetry and the full hearted song of a bird (for example, the song of Shelley's Skylark). However, this initial definition is rendered incomplete and problematic with some other ideas connected to the language of poetry: the 'selection of language really used by men' and the addition of metre and rhyme to it. Wordsworth does not try to resolve this confusion but modifies the statement thus: "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous

overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappear and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does its actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on." It has to be noted here that the expressions - 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' – seem to mean ideas distinctly opposite to each other: the first one happening suddenly without individual effort while the other recalled to memory deliberately.

However, despite this apparent difference, Wordsworth makes no difference between the two and attempts to explain the one with the help of the other. Actually, as it appears from the elucidation of the first statement by the second, he tries to mean the same thing by both statements. His meaning in the two statements seems to be that poetry is the 'final product' of the 'unforced' overflow of powerful feelings. As Wordsworth does not try to clarify the problem, the readers have no other means than reconciling the opposing statements by force to produce such meaning. However, the second statement seems to be a well thought-out one and it explains his stand on the idea of poetry more clearly. In fact, most of his own great works were composed in the state of 'recollected in tranquillity'. A classic example is his "Solitary Reaper", where a moving sight of the solitary reaper was seen during a walk, it got stored in the memory, and in moments of calm contemplation, the sight is recalled and woven in words to compose the poem. In this process of poetic creation, the emotion originally aroused by the sight was re-created in contemplation as nearly as possible till it overpowered the mind completely. Thus, in Wordsworth's theory, poetry originates in powerful emotion recollected in tranquillity; and thus it is the product of the original free flow of that emotion. Had there been aroused no emotion in the beginning, no recollection would have been possible in the state of tranquillity and hence there would be no composition of poetry. Here, the first stage in the process of poetic creation is 'the spontaneous overflow

of powerful feelings,' followed by the next in the form of 'recollection in tranquillity', resulting in the expression in poetry.

Wordsworth and Imagination:

For Wordsworth, imagination is the most important gift that a poet can have. Wordsworth held the opinion that nature can add in poetry a sense of mystery and uncommonness in the ordinary objects of nature and human life. A colouring of imagination upon the common things of life and nature can make them appear to be uncommon; imagination can make the natural appear like the supernatural. In the poet's imagination, the ordinary objects are so heightened and glorified that they seem completely transmuted and transfigured. The ordinary things of life and nature thus assume new appearance and acquire a new charm under the imaginative treatment of the poet.

The Function of Poetry and the Poet:

Wordsworth believes that the function of poetry and poets in a serious one. The function of poetry is not limited to the mere self-expression of the poet as suggested by 'spontaneous overflow' in the definition of poetry. Poetry stands or falls by its effect on the reader. The poet 'is a man speaking to men'; if he fails to address men, his song reduces to a mere voice in the wilderness. The poet's over-all objective is, without any doubt, to impart pleasure; but the pleasure in poetry is conditioned by the situation where the moral gain far outweighs the aesthetic. The aesthetic effect arises from the poet's style and manner of saying things and from his use of metre or rhythm, which, with their pleasurable recurrence, make even pathetic situations and sentiments painless. The moral learning, on the other hand, consists partly in the refinement of feelings through true poetic effects, and partly in the exercise of the knowledge of 'Man, Nature, and Human Life', and partly in its emphasis on whatever makes life richer and fuller: 'Truth, Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope'. A poet is gifted with the greater power to feel and to express feelings than other common men. Hence, he has a direct

access to the reader's heart; and as his feelings are saner, purer, and more permanent than can be aroused by the same objects in other men. The reader is induced by poetry to feel the poet's way in the same situation and even in others. The reader, thus, emerges saner and purer than before.

For Wordsworth, poetry is the pursuit of truth; it is the pursuit of man's knowledge of himself and the world around him. Here Wordsworth tries to distinguish between poetry and other human intellectual exercises like science, mathematics etc. Science and other disciplines are also engaged in the same pursuit of truth; but while the truths science discovers benefits humans only materially, the truths discovered in poetry 'cleave to us as a necessary part of our existence'. It is because, the truth observed in poetry is concerned with man's relation to man, on the one hand, and his relation to the external world of nature, on the other, both illustrated in 'incidents and situation from common life'. While the pursuit of a specific discipline like Botany, Chemistry, Mathematics or other science pleases the practitioner of the particular discipline, there is nothing in their truths that can equally please the common man. The pleasure derived from those disciplines is confined to those only who know the disciplines. Such truths, being purely the product of the 'meddling intellect', are never 'felt in the blood, and felt along the heart', as the truths of poetry do. Thus, Wordsworth arrives at his one of the most quoted expressions: 'Poetry (therefore) is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science'.

Poetry, for Wordsworth, is a force with intense affinity towards what is good and superior. He observes that the chief objective of him behind writing poetry was "to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to each the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous." Thus, he develops the general conclusion that every great poet keeps in his or her mind the basic intention to impart something good to the reader: 'I wish either to be considered as a

teacher or as nothing.' In this context, we can compare Wordsworth with Plato keeping in view the common ground they shared in terms of the educative nature of poetry. However, considering Wordsworth's recurrent insistence on pleasure as being a necessary condition of poetic teaching, he may be viewed as a follower of Horace much more than Plato. But, again, he seems to echo the Plato in an observation made about his own poetry and the educative value of them: "they will cooperate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, and will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier." The benign tendencies that he refers to in the "Preface" are defined as 'relationship and love'; and it is the great function of poetry to promote these benign feelings. However, they are to be induced in the people through a diffusion of feelings rather than through a mere appeal to the intellect. This is the point where Wordsworth differs from the neo-classicists in his articulation of the concept of teaching through poetry.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is Wordsworth's take on the selection of the object for poetry?

Q 6: What is the poetic diction for Wordsworth?

Q 7: In what way does Wordsworth's language of poetry differ from the language of prose?

Q 8: How does Wordsworth define poetic art?

Q 9: How does Wordsworth distinguish the role of "Imagination" in the creative process?

Q10: What, according to Wordsworth, is the function of poetry?

9.6 RECEPTION OF WORDSWORTH AS A CRITIC

Wordsworth was never trained to be a literary critic; neither did he want to be one. He was dragged into literary criticism by the vehement rejection of his *Lyrical Ballads* he witnessed from a selected section of the literary society. His defence in the form of the "Preface", which was

edited and modified more than once, would later function as an important document to clarify certain basic traits of English Romanticism. In that way, despite being accidentally forced to the field of literary criticism, Wordsworth offers the 'manifesto' of English Romanticism in the form of the "Preface". His attack on the neo-classical Poetic Diction is a path-breaking as well as eye-opening exercise for his contemporary poets and critics. However, it has to be admitted that his emphasis on the 'rustic', 'real language of men' has been severely questioned by his fellow poet Coleridge. He himself did not practice what he preached in terms of the language of poetry, as is evident from most of his famous poems. Thus, serious questions can be raised on the authenticity and integrity of the critic in Wordsworth.

Despite his limitations as a critic, his influence and contribution to English literary criticism cannot be utterly negated. He is one of the pioneers to attribute creative faculty to imagination, thereby debunking the mere passivity attributed on it by the neo-classics. Apart from that, he indulged in some of the more serious and age-old debates over the function and object of poetry. In his "Preface", Wordsworth opposed the neo-classical practice of judging a work of art by the application of tests based on ancient models. These tests are limited because they can, at the most, judge the external qualities of the work – its structure, diction, metre, and the like. A work might be flawless in all these and yet fail 'to please always and please all'. A critic interested in all these external elements may easily be pleased with the perfection of these niceties. However, such niceties cannot be enough to judge the merit of a poet or a piece of poetry. Wordsworth concludes that the success or greatness of poetry lay neither in a particular diction nor in a particular mode expression. It lay rather in the healthy pleasure it afford to the reader. This healthy pleasure may arise as much from the use of common language as from the customary language of poetry, and as much from the writer's individual mode of writing as from that laid down by new-classicism. In this connection, what Wordsworth says about the style of his *Lyrical Ballads* can be applied equally to the general poetic practice: "I am well

aware that others who pursue different track may interest him likewise; I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a difference claim of my own." This expression summarises actually all that he wanted to express in the "Preface": it is through the application of the common principle of 'live and let live' in the sphere of letters that the individual space for self-expression in Romanticism is defined and practiced.



9.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you must have developed a fair idea about the basic thematic concerns of the essay *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads.* In the *Preface* Wordsworth subverts certain conventional norms of poetry established by his neo-classical predecessors. First, Wordsworth finds in the life of the common people the most important and meaningful objects of poetry. Secondly, in the treatment of such 'common', 'rustic' themes, he advocated for the employment of the language 'really used by man'. This selection of the most suitable language for poetry goes directly against the poetic diction of the neo-classicists. His choice of language is a revolt against 'the gaudiness and inane phraseology' of the 18th century poets. Wordsworth further observes that there can be no difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. In Wordsworth's theory, poetry is composed from the powerful emotions stored in the mind, recollected later in the state of tranquillity, and woven in the fabric of words. For Wordsworth, poetry is the pursuit of truth; it is the pursuit of man's knowledge of himself and the world around him. "Poetry (therefore) is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science." It is a force with intense affinity towards what is good and superior.



9.8 FURTHER READING

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9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: In 1795, Wordsworth met Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Somerset… …both friends together published *Lyrical Ballads* in the autumn of 1798… …Wordsworth termed his poems published in the volume as some 'experimental' works of poetry… …the publication was a path-breaking moment in the history of English literature… …this collection included 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."

Ans to Q No 2: Attached to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads,* the "Preface" considered a central work of Romantic literary theory… …this "Preface" later came to be regarded as the 'manifesto' of English Romantic criticism… …this "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads"* offers a detailed discussion of what Wordsworth believes as the elements of a new type of poetry, which would be based on the

"real language of men," and which would avoid the poetic diction of much 18th century poetry.

Ans to Q No 3: The primary objective was to establish incidents and situations drawn from common life as the subject matter of poetry… … the other objective was to write poetry rejecting poetic diction of the Neo-Classicists with the use the language 'really used by men'.

Ans to Q No 4: Wordsworth extends the scope of poetry, by incorporating themes chosen from lives of the rustic, humble and common people… …rustic people live close to nature far away from artificiality and vanity… …their language becomes more expressive of the vital truths of life… …the incidents and situations from common life, expressed in the language really used by men, can be the worthy subject matter of poetry.

Ans to Q No 5: The low and rustic life – that condition, free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience – "convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions." – 'simple language" is more permanent – a far more philosophical language – expressive of the basic truth of life.

Ans to Q No 6: His theory of poetic diction was to imitate, and as far as possible to adopt" the very language of men" – to bring "language near to the language of men".

Ans to Q No 7: The language of poetry cannot differ materially from that of prose – it is only the addition of metre that the pleasure is superadded to a rational mind.

Ans to Q No 8: Good poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' – it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility – the emotion is contemplated, the tranquility gradually disappears and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced – In this mood begins the actual successful composition.

Ans to Q No 9: A colouring of imagination upon the common things of life and nature make them appear to be uncommon… …to make the natural appear like the supernatural… …the ordinary objects are heightened and glorified by the poet's imagination… …they seem completely transmuted and transfigured… ...the whole of Wordsworth's poetry is an integrated vision of nature and man revealed through his imagination.

Ans to Q No 10: The poet is a 'man speaking to men'… …poetry should give pleasure to the common men… …the moral consists partly in the refinement of feelings which true poetry effects, partly is the knowledge of "Man, Nature and Human life" and on things that makes life fuller and richer… …poetry is "the breath and fines spirit of all knowledge, it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science."



9.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss how William Wordsworth revolts against the neo-classical theory of poetic diction.

Q 2: Write a note on Wordsworth's contribution to the development of the importance of imagination in Romantic literary Criticism.

Q 3: Write an essay on Wordsworth's concept of poetic art.

Q 4: How, according to Wordsworth, are the subject matter and the language of poetry interrelated? Discuss.

Q 5: Discuss, after Wordsworth, the functions of poetry in human society.

Q 6: How does Wordsworth understand and define the qualifications of a poet? Explain.

Q 7: Evaluate the critical value of Wordsworth's "Preface" in the context of English Romanticism.

Q 8: Do you consider Wordsworth as a good critic? Justify your position with proper arguments.

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