



## Wordsworth on Trial: De-romanticizing the Poet Laureate

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### Abstract

*Wordsworth's poetry, and in the massive body of literary criticism that followed his works, establish him firmly as a revered poet-prophet of the people that preached simplicity and love for Nature, elevating him to a saintly status in literary canon. This study, however, employs Deconstruction as a lens in order to bring the Poet Laureate to trial, and critically evaluate the credibility of this accorded status. The personage and poetry of William Wordsworth shall be examined by utilizing a deconstructive lens, which entails not only a close, unbiased examination of his poetry and the elements it portrayed, but also an investigation of verifiable facts about the poet's personal life. To ensure a fair trial, a balanced introduction shall be presented in order to establish key facts about Wordsworth and his literary contributions; this will be followed by a thorough examination of his work and critical opinions with the aim to de-romanticize the celebrated poet. Deconstructive approach will be cohesively applied in order to determine what Wordsworth truly was: a great Romantic poet of the people that loved Nature truly, or a clever opportunist who tapped into nostalgic sentiments to make his name- both in real life, and in the literary world.*

### Wordsworth on Trial

#### De-romanticizing the Poet of Nature

In this paper, a deconstructive approach shall be applied to carefully examine the personage and poetry of the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. For centuries, Wordsworth's works have been regarded as "unified artistic artefacts". This paper questions the particular notion and proves that Wordsworth's works are clever machinations of a crafty poet who, through non-linear bouts of questionable excellence, produced tailored poetry that would be popular among the masses. Through a close examination of his poetry, the paper will further highlight the inherent failings and contradictions featuring prominently in Wordsworth's version of "Nature", which would be proved as a mere figment of his imagination.

The benevolent and prophet-like image and Wordsworth's presence of as a "teacher" and guide shall also be brought under scrutiny. It will further be proved that Wordsworth was rather an opportunist who tapped into the prevalent sentiments of people with great success. Furthermore, criticism produced by Wordsworth, such as present in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, and his theory of poetic diction would be questioned; the oppositions as well as contradictions present in Wordsworth's own work in relation to his theories would be brought to light.

Another aspect that would be discussed in this essay is Wordsworth's Romantic Ideal and its presence in his poetry. Through an examination of selected poetic texts as well as secondary resources, the paper will demonstrate that Wordsworth's work has evolved with expedient political and religious trends at the time, thereby making his status as the ideal Romantic Poet dubious and precarious, and distorting his "Romantic Ideal".

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this essay is based on the theory of Deconstruction, which was developed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

#### Deconstruction:

Deconstruction is a form of literary analysis that "questions the fundamental conceptual distinctions, or 'oppositions'...through a close examination of the language and logic...of literary texts." (Encyclopedia Britannica). To put it simply, a Deconstructionist reading of a text seeks to expose any inherently present contradictions that may exist in it. It thus paves the way towards an improved understanding of what the text entails. According to Peter Barry, "Texts previously

regarded as unified artistic artefacts are shown to be fragmented, self-divided, and centerless.” (Barry, 2017. p.70). In addition, one of the most important elements of Deconstruction is the presence of a “decentered universe”, in which nothing is absolute, and everything is known in relation to something else. Since there is nothing absolute, any and all meanings are arbitrary and language is subject to “difference”, which means a “delaying of meaning”; that is, once the meaning of any word is investigated, there is only a continuous stream of synonyms and definitions which do not provide a final answer or “true meaning”.

### **Literature Review**

Rachel Thorpe, in her essay *Responding to Wordsworth: A Critical History*, rightfully comments that “The name Wordsworth sold books, and so people began to write about him to gain fame for themselves. Everyone had an opinion on Wordsworth and wanted to share it” (Thorpe, 2024).

The sheer amount of literary criticism that focuses on Wordsworth, then, began with the publication of his and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, and the catalyst for most of the “eddy of criticism” (Coleridge) was Wordsworth’s famous Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

In a relatively short time, critical opinion shifted in favour of Wordsworth, which is also mentioned in Thorpe’s essay. In following centuries, critical opinion shifted overwhelmingly in favour of Wordsworth, according him a legendary status within literary canon. However, this study seeks to demonstrate that despite this acclaim, critical discussions have seldom challenged the core of Wordsworth’s revered image. This can be further verified by various other academic resources, four more of which will be discussed.

In the *Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth*, Paul Hamilton notes that “Wordsworth almost always takes centre stage” (Hamilton, 2006, p.216) when it comes to Romantic-era poetry, and that he is part of a “canonical core of writers” that “have remained the touchstones of canonical English poetry of the romantic age.” Hamilton, however, argues that Wordsworth’s political and personal involvements were “overlooked by his critics or suppressed by him for his reputation to flourish.” His status also rose not in “the heyday” of Romantic poetry, but during the reign of Queen Victoria. This presents logical evidence that the poet’s status was not due to his masterful poetic genius, but rather perhaps a result of expedient political affiliations.

In *The Life of William Wordsworth*, Worthen presents a critical biography of Wordsworth’s life, and highlights that Wordsworth did not always enjoy the status he does today; rather, many of his poems were critically attacked and even ridiculed. Worthen, in addition, notes that Wordsworth gained the post of Poet Laureate in 1843 not because of any special achievement, and it was a “purely honorary post” that he initially refused (Worthen, 2014, p. 463). Worthen also highlights that most of Wordsworth’s contemporaries such as Coleridge, Lamb, and Southey had passed away before he became eligible for the aforementioned post, which is now arguably regarded as evidence of his poetic genius. This biography by Wordsworth thus sheds light on verifiable facts that allow for a reexamination of Wordsworth’s status.

Robertson in *The European Romantic Review* notes that “The twenty-first century has seen the rise of ecocriticism and cognitive approaches to literature, and a renewed interest in intellectual history, scientific, and other contexts...these factors made Wordsworth a figure who, once again, offers Romanticists rich intellectual possibilities.” Robertson mentions several resources, books, and essays that focus upon Wordsworth’s poetry and also explore facets of his personal life. However, any mention of resources that offer a critical examination of Wordsworth’s status in

literary canon is absent, allowing for a research opportunity that this study seeks to utilize effectively.

In the Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth, Andrew Bennett's essay, Wordsworth in Modern Literary Criticism traces the scholarship on Wordsworth comprehensively. Whilst Bennett provides much information on modern criticism, a noteworthy observation is that "The major development in Wordsworth studies of the 1980s, indeed, and what is still perhaps the most influential approach to Romanticism generally, is the energetically historicized and politicized mode of criticism known as 'New Historicism', a mode of criticism that both develops and moves away from deconstruction".

Andrew Bennett then mentions "Levinson's 'deconstructive materialism', which is "said to challenge or 'deconstruct' the fundamental assumptions behind a reading of Wordsworth based on an 'agon' of self and other..." (Bennett, 2015). The author also highlights Kroeber's insights on Wordsworth, which called for an ecological reinterpretation of Wordsworth. Recent scholarship in that field, according to Bennett's explication of Scott Hess' work, led to the insight that "The Wordsworthian sense of nature is thereby said to articulate a very specific set of social, economic, and class affiliations and assumptions: nature, in effect and despite appearances, is an assertion of individualized (bourgeois) identity."

This insight, quoted by Bennett, opens the floor for discussion in this essay. Although it is not a complete or comprehensive call for a reevaluation of Wordsworth, and is also limited to an ecocritical perspective, it nonetheless calls for a discussion, which takes place in this essay.

The literature review thus proves that although, in recent times, questions about Wordsworth have emerged, the literary canon- and Wordsworth's legendary status as the ideal Romantic poet, remain firmly in place. Levinson's deconstructive materialism also did not deal with deconstructing the poetry or personage of William Wordsworth, but rather focused upon the charge of egotism upon Wordsworth. This essay, then, employs a modern Deconstructive approach, in the sense that Wordsworth's poetry, personage and image be brought under close scrutiny in order to determine the validity and credibility of his accorded celebrity status in literary canon. In doing so, this essay aims to provide novel insights into the works and personage of William Wordsworth.

William Wordsworth, deemed the Poet Laureate of England in 1843, is recognized as one of the founders of Romanticism in English Literature. "Poetry," wrote William Wordsworth, "is the spontaneous and powerful flow of emotions recollected in tranquility." (Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, 1800). These words became the manifesto of the English Romantic movement in poetry (Encyclopedia Britannica. 2024). The debate, whether Wordsworth was a truly a great poet or not, has dominated most of English poetic discourse, and has made Wordsworth a permanent figure outlined by poetic controversy. Wordsworth's contemporary, critic, and fellow poet as well as co-founder of the Romantic Movement, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, noted that "[His work] produced an eddy of criticism, which would of itself have borne up the poems by the violence, with which it whirled them round and round." (Coleridge, 1834).

Rachel Thorpe in her essay on Wordsworth notes a recent critic Stephen Gill's observation that "visibility [their prominence as critics] is enhanced by a full-dress re-appraisal of Wordsworth's contemporary significance" (Thorpe, 2024, para, 10) Thorpe further comments that "The name Wordsworth sold books, and so people began to write about him to gain fame for themselves. Everyone had an opinion on Wordsworth and wanted to share it".

This observation and the prevalence of criticism on Wordsworth opens up the debate of Wordsworth's authenticity and merit as a "poet of nature", and one is compelled to re-evaluate the

idealistic image of Wordsworth that is still firmly rooted in most critical works. In other words, an attempt to “de-romanticise” Wordsworth must be made in order to achieve a holistic view of the situation. However, to offer a simplistic lambasting of Wordsworth in order to ‘de-romanticise’ him would be injudicious, and in order to appraise the poet’s craft on a critical level, it is imperative to observe certain components of his works.

### **Why was Wordsworth Popular?**

Wordsworth was popular among the masses, and was given the title of Poet Laureate in 1843. His poetry presented a break from the Neoclassical Tradition, which was centered around didacticism and the instruction of readers. What made his poetry unique was not only an experimental play with form and structure, but also choice of language and subject matter, through which he was able to reach a much wider audience. He commented in the 1800 edition Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, “The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems 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.” (Wordsworth, 1800).

While many critics were against Wordsworth, his poetry had great impact on people. Other prominent literary critics recognized his importance, such as John Stuart Mill, who commented, “What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a Source of inward joy...” (Mill, qtd. in McKinnell, 2015, p.43).

As aforementioned, Wordsworth’s choice of “the language really used by men” played a pivotal role in making him successful. He also chose novel settings for his poems, “Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because...the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language...lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” (Wordsworth, 1800)

This deliberate choice by Wordsworth allowed him to paint a quaint picture of the countryside and present Nature as a benevolent and merciful being. He was able to portray rural life as filled with joys. This was not at all common at the time. William Hazlitt, a contemporary of Wordsworth, who was although critical of the poet, called him the “spoiled child of disappointment”. He further remarked that he was, at the time, “the most original poet now living” (Hazlitt, qtd in Thorpe, 2024).

Regardless of whether Wordsworth’s poems held any merit, the innovation he brought allowed him to capitalize on the then-existing gap in English poetry.

Matthew Arnold, a prominent critic in his essay *The Function of Criticism* noted that although Wordsworth was vehemently against critics, he was, ironically, “himself a great critic, and it is to be sincerely regretted that he has not left us more criticism” (Arnold). William Wordsworth presented his own theory of poetic diction in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Two of the main points of this theory, namely, the choice of language and of setting have been discussed. The other points featured Wordsworth’s deliberate omission of meter and poetic decorum, and, most significantly, his claim that there was no “essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition” (Wordsworth 1800). While Wordsworth’s perspective on poetry remains unchallenged, it is crucial that the other side of the picture should be looked into in order to question the idealistic portrait of the poet through facts.

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## The Problem with Wordsworth

### Wordsworth's Nature:

A long-standing misconception about Wordsworth is ostensibly the belief that his portrayal of Nature is as accurate as a picture of reality. The problem comes to the surface when no mention of "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson, 1849) is apparent in Wordsworth's poetry. He persistently presents Nature as a benefactor, "Let Nature be your teacher" (The Tables Turned), and does not highlight the dangers that are ever-present in Nature- he makes no mention of natural disasters and scarcely gives importance to mundane situations like rough or bad weather. There is no "STORM-BLAST" (Coleridge, 1834) to trouble his wandering self, and no "ravine" (Tennyson, 1834) appears in his path.

The portrayal of nature is decidedly one-dimensional in Wordsworth's poetry. He appears to draw similar portraits in every poem of his, and does not take a holistic or even realistic view of Nature, which is ironical considering that he ostensibly wished to talk about "incidents and situations from common life". The Nature in Wordsworth, in the light of these facts, appears to be a figment of his imagination. Hardly a physical place within the reach of any traveler, it is a fantastical space suspended in the poet's imagination.

### *Political Expediency:*

Another important thing to note is that Wordsworth deliberately ignored catastrophes and political events when it was apparently "not safe" or "inconvenient" for him. For example, at the start of the Napoleonic Wars, Wordsworth was supportive, but later on changed his views and became more conservative. Wordsworth found worthwhile to comment on this event and also produce works on it. However, there is no mention of the Irish Rebellion of 1798, since it would have been perhaps "too political" for the "poet of nature" to comment upon the atrocities that were committed by the British Empire. Wordsworth simply chose not to write about it and this perhaps was precisely what the then dominant power wanted from him.

Wordsworth, therefore, manufactured his own portrayal of imaginary nature and only approached sensitive topics whenever it was convenient or safe for him to do so. He also chose not to talk about the abolitionist movement, in contrast to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who did engage with abolitionist themes.

Wordsworth, therefore, was only apparently a "poet of nature". His portrayal of nature was inaccurate, and he was political or a realist only when it suited him. He also found it convenient not to talk about the atrocities being committed by England in its colonies. He only talked about the niceness of nature and its healing effects- based on his experiences in the "Nature" of the English countryside, but the brutal and imperialistic nature of the English at the time find no recognition in Wordsworth's poetry.

***The Pragmatic Aspect of the World:*** Wordsworth was the son of John Wordsworth, a "prosperous estate manager" (Encyclopedia Britannica) and was consequently raised in a comfortable environment. Finances were not a problem for him much of his life. Even in his adult life, after a few scruples, he was able to afford being a poet as he inherited a legacy of nine hundred pounds from Raisley Calvery. This sum allowed Wordsworth financial independence and ample time to pursue his career as a poet. In addition, in 1802, he was able to inherit a sum of four thousand pounds that was owed to his father, and he married promptly thereafter.

Wordsworth's romantic portrayal of rural life is, therefore, based on comfortable experiences. He did not address death, disease, or the laborious mode of life that villagers were forced to adhere to in his time, and only presented his own version of idealized, idyllic life that was far from reality,

but marketed as real. He was perhaps not the best authority on nature and life as a whole, since his perception and experiences were vastly different from any common or rustic man's, whose language and homeland he ostensibly wished to represent.

### **The Deliberate Manufacturing in Wordsworth's Poetry**

As aforementioned, Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." This definition of poetry seems to suggest that poetry would be a natural occurrence, and not one consciously planned, and this impression of Wordsworth seems to feature heavily in his works. However, in his Preface, Wordsworth admitted, regarding poetic diction, that "as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it..." (Wordsworth, 1800).

There is the element of deliberate "manufacturing" in Wordsworth's poetry. In addition, it is worthwhile to note that the poetry of Wordsworth was not a natural and new delightful way of poetic composition, but a planned reactionary movement against Neoclassical poetry.

It should also be noted that William Wordsworth refined his poems in later life in order to better incorporate Christianity and religious views. Helen Darbishire has noted, "When his religious thought flowed into the channel of Anglican doctrine he had to retouch his autobiography, and incidentally tamper with its poetry, in the spirit of that doctrine" (Darbishire, 1966). A similar view would be held by Harper Garrod, Wordsworth's biographer, also a professor, who believed that "The Prelude was revised by Wordsworth after 1807 in such a fashion as to do detriment, in essential matters, to its original purity of outline". (Garrod, 1927).

One should especially wonder why the emotions recollected in calm tranquility would need certain and somewhat biased refinement. Wordsworth, then deviated from his own principles, and also his idea of poetry itself.

#### **Deviation from Poetic Theory:**

Wordsworth also deviated considerably from his own theory of poetic diction in several of his works. One of the chief arguments that Wordsworth presented in his theory was for the omission of metre; in his preface to the Lyrical Ballads, he argued, "a very small part of the pleasure given by Poetry depends upon the metre, and that it is injudicious to write in metre..." (Wordsworth, 1800)

However, Wordsworth disregarded his theory in one of his most celebrated works. A notable example of this is the composition titled Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, which brought him fame and recognition. However, the poem itself is, ironically, composed in iambic pentameter. Wordsworth would have doubtlessly chosen meter consciously; and was aware of its impact. In Wordsworth, Hunt, and Romantic Understanding of Meter, David Perkins notes, "As obvious marks of poeticalness, lineation and meter immediately activate the special way of reading that is appropriate to poetry" (Perkins, 1994).

Since Wordsworth deliberately chose to ignore his own theory, it would make his argument and perhaps even his theory, hollow. In addition, as noted by Coleridge, "there is little that is rustic in the poems...which bespeak the poet's craft and ability, but not his simplicity and easy language" (Coleridge, 1834).

#### **Coleridge's Criticism**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself, a friend of Wordsworth and co-author of the Lyrical Ballads severely criticized Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction, and in his composition, Biographia Literaria, set out to differentiate and defend his own views. Coleridge thoroughly dissected

Wordsworth's Theory and made his own statements. He chose to argue against several tenets of Wordsworth's theory, the first being against Wordsworth's adoption of what he said to be the "selection of the REAL language of men", the second against "the best part of language" being derived from rustic sources, and lastly, against the Wordsworthian claim that "between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference." (Wordsworth, 1800).

To the first assertion, Coleridge argued that there was no such common thing as the "real" language of men. He stated that "Every man's language has, first, its individualities..." and commented upon the role that knowledge and education could have in determining the expression of any person. In addition, he stated that "the language so highly extolled by Mr. Wordsworth varies in every county, nay, in every village." (Coleridge, 1834, p. 201), thus shattering Wordsworth's illusion of an idealistic and universal village wherein the spoken speech was common.

Coleridge also stated that the modifications that Wordsworth made to the language that he picked for his poetry were "numerous and weighty". In the light of Coleridge's argument and given facts, Wordsworth's images seem more and more like a fantasy rather than a depiction of life.

Secondly, Coleridge argued that Wordsworth's assertion about the best part of language being derived from rustic origins was based upon a misconception. He stated, "I deny that the words, and combinations of words derived from the objects with which the rustic is familiar...can be justly said to form the best part of language." (Coleridge, 1834, p. 203). Coleridge strongly reacted against this assertion; he was of the opinion that all, if not most, of the best part of language was received from scholars and people who had been educated and been to "universities". In essence, he highlighted the "scanty vocabulary" of the common peasant in England at the time, and highlighted the idealistic nature of Wordsworth's assertion.

Lastly, Coleridge stated, "Now, prose itself, at least, in all argumentative and consecutive works, differs, and ought to differ, from the language of conversation; even as reading ought to differ from talking" (Coleridge, 1834, p. 203). He completely disagreed with Wordsworth's opinion regarding poetry and prose being no different from each other in terms of their use of language. Substantiating his argument, he asserted that poetry and prose differed in manner of construction, grammar, and "parts of speech". He also said that Wordsworth's opinions and usage of Gray's sonnet was merely based on a "sophism".

Coleridge, therefore, highlighted several of Wordsworth's weaknesses, and masterfully provided logical arguments to deconstruct Wordsworth's idealized and fantastic concept of "rustic life".

### **Other Defects of Wordsworth's Poetry**

Wordsworth's poetry suffered from several defects. The most prominent of these was the inequality of production; he could not seem to be able to produce works which were equivalent in scale or had similar production quality. This becomes evident while comparing these verses from 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey',

"O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods, /How often has my spirit turned to thee!" To these lines about a grave:

"I've measured it from side to side/ It's three feet long and two feet wide."

Another feature that appears to be absent from Wordsworth's poetry, which according to him, is all about human emotions, is the absence of a very instinctive genuine human emotion, i.e. love. As a Romantic poet dealing with feelings, emotions, and human experience, it seems surprising that Wordsworth would have ignored this aspect. Stopford Brooke stated, "There is an element

almost altogether wanting in Wordsworth, the absence of which forbids us to class him as a poet who has touched all important sides of human life-the element of passionate love (Brooke).”

Wordsworth, therefore, was seemingly unable to produce poetry of similar scale, and did not offer a well-rounded examination of the human experience and Nature.

William Wordsworth, the Poet Laureate of England, doubtless remains a critically important figure in English Literature. While he achieved great success in his own lifetime, his critics also made counter-arguments. Nevertheless, Wordsworth offered a fresh perspective on poetry, offered something original that was cherished by many. However, he also strayed far from his principles of poetic composition, and violated his own theory of poetic diction. He offered not a picture of reality, but of an idealized “Wordsworth-shire”, as he was not in touch with reality or actual rustic life. Regardless, he remains one of the greatest poets in English history.

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