

## **Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*: A Study in the Theory of Poetry (with special reference to "The Solitary Reaper")**

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**Abstract.** William Wordsworth wrote *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* in which he advocated his own theory of poetry. This theory was a new taste for the reader especially in the matter of theme and style. Wordsworth's theory of poetry aims at writing poetry against the neo-classical theory of poetry, as Neo-classical theory of poetry is totally based on the aristocratic life rather than rustic life. In *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth gave a new pattern to write poetry and he discusses its purpose too. He advocates that the theme should be adopted from the common 'incidents and situation'; the language should be from common man's life; poet should write as a man and then the 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity'. This paper aims at presenting Wordsworth's theory of poetry with special reference to the poem "The Solitary Reaper".

**Keywords :** Neo-classicism; Romanticism; Romantic Revival; Poetic diction; common incidents and situation; simplicity of language; humble and rustic life.

The French Revolution remained prominent in shaping Romantic Revival. The year from 1789 to 1799 commonly marks the period of French Revolution which brought a violent end to feudal powers and monarchy and asserted the right and supremacy of the individual free will. And this new philosophy of the rights of all men was expressed both in politics and literature. Later this led to the liberalism in literature. The political liberalism of French Revolution inspired the liberation, individuality and rejection of prescribed rules in the Romantic literature. The Romantic poets were inspired by the ideals of 'Equality, Fraternity and Liberty' which were the watchword of the French revolution. They revolted against the tyranny of set formulas, rules and conventions. They asserted the dignity of individual spirit. This new form of philosophy became one of the main guidelines of a new school of Romantic poets, writers and philosophers. Ultimately, this led to the search for fresh subject, their belief in nature and their emphasis upon spontaneity. They also believe that everyone has a right to express his own idea which features individualism and it was the prime demand of French Revolution.

William Wordsworth, both as poet and critic the pioneer of the romantic revival, was born at Cockermuouth in the Lake District of Cumberland on April 7, 1770. His father was a law agent to Sir James Lawther, first Earl of Lonsdale. His mother, Anny was the daughter of a Penrith Tradesman. The loss of his parents at an early age made him dependent upon his uncle for his education. He went to school

at Hawkshead, where he read what he wanted. He was greatly influenced by the scenes around him. It was during this period and he spent his holidays at Hawkshead and Penrith that he met Mary Hutchinson, whom he married later. Wordsworth began working on the first extended poetic efforts of his maturity – Descriptive Sketches after the appearance of a poem “An Evening Walk” at Cambridge.

The Revolution in France initially affected Wordsworth profoundly. The philosophy acquired in the course of the Revolution left a lasting mark on Wordsworth which can be seen in his spokesmanship for the common man. The excesses and the declaration of war between England and France brought a rude shock to the poet's dream of a new-born world. At this period of crisis, his sister Dorothy played an important role as a healer. This can be seen here :

This decline was the nemesis of repressed passion. We doubt it. Wordsworth's passion for Annette troubled the surface of his mind for some years but not its depths. The nightmares that afflicted him continually for years after his return from France came not from repressed passion but from remembered terrors. The proximate cause of the withering of his genius, we believe, was Critical History of English Poetry overwork. (Grierson 305)

In 1795, a fortunate legacy enabled Wordsworth to settle down at Racedown with his sister. Here he met Coleridge, and thus began friendship of his career. In 1797, Coleridge moved to Somersetshire, and Wordsworth followed. In 1798, these two writers published the *Lyrical Ballads* which proves the most important milestones of English literature. After the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth went on a tour of Germany. And there Wordsworth wrote the *Lucy* series. As he grew older; he became more conservative in matter of religion and politics. In 1843, long after the passage of his really creative period, he was appointed Poet Laureate. He died at Rydal Mount on April 23, 1850, and he was buried at Grasmere Churchyard. Though, his works had been criticised earlier when they were published, but later brought admiration and respect. After his death, a monument in his honor was erected in Westminster Abbey. It has been rightly observed :

Wordsworth we think of principally as the poet of Nature, but that is an incomplete view. He is at the centre, one of the great poets of love. The ultimate solution of problem of life; but he has not Shelley's impatience, nor Milton's intellectuality. (*Milton and Wordsworth* 182)

Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* was revised till it had its present form. *The Lyrical Ballads* was first published in 1798. In 1800, he added a detailed Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* and it was extended and modified in 1802. A fourth and final edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1805. Wordsworth's aim in writing the Preface was not to give an elaborate account of his theory of poetry or to make a systematic defence of his point-of-view. He added the Preface because he felt that his poems were different in theme and style, and therefore, he should not present them without an introduction. Thus, Wordsworth tried to do with the help of the Preface. And this approach has been observed here :

And Wordsworth conveys this part of natural truth  
to us as no other poet has ever done; no other poet  
having had in him so much of reflective peasant.  
(Symons 92)

The present paper aims at tracing Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry in his famous poem "The Solitary Reaper" in context of the *Lyrical Ballads*. In the poem, "The Solitary Reaper" the simple peasant girl, the presentation of her song through simple language, singing a folk song as a commoner, and the flow of her song which all combine into one Wordsworth's theory of poetry that poetry should be composed on the common theme in the language of ordinary man by the poet as a man and at last 'poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion'. (Hutchinson 740) In other words, Wordsworth indirectly advocated his theory of poetry through "The Solitary Reaper". In the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth discusses his desire to create his own format of poetry for the ordinary man against the artificiality of classical poetry. This quite resembles Coleridge's claims about the artificiality of aristocratic taste. In breaking away from this over decorated style, Wordsworth wants to stress and adopt the language of common men. This new trend of poetry, created by both Wordsworth and Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads*, led to much criticism. These criticisms were evident to Wordsworth and Coleridge, who afterwards showed separate reactions. M.H. Abrams once said;

The first critic of Wordsworth's poetry is  
Wordsworth himself. (Abrams 76)

"The Solitary Reaper" is the best lyric poem of Wordsworth. It has been composed in 1805 and was first published in *Poems*, in two volumes in 1807. This poem was an account of Wordsworth along with Dorothy's and Coleridge's tour of the Highlands of Scotland. That much captured moment led to the unforgettable experience in form of "The Solitary Reaper". He believed that if the poet writes

down his immediate feelings, he would not be able to do justice to his composition. Here, Wordsworth touches upon that how he was moved by the sight of highland girl who alone was singing and reaping grain in the field. The poet seems to be highly influenced by the soft melancholy, sadness and wistfulness of the song that he hears. The song has left unforgettable impressions and has dwelled into the innermost chords of the poet's mind. He preferred a simple familiar girl of a peasant as the subject of his poem. This is something uncommon in the history of English poetry because most of the poets of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were concerned with portraying urban life and its people

In *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth at first discusses about 'incidents and situations' (734) which should be opted from common man's life as the subject-matter for poetry. It avoids the over-decorated style and poetic diction of much neo- classical poetry. It can be seen here :

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself 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, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way.(Hutchinson 734)

This stress on feeling, simplicity, and the pleasure of beauty over rhetoric, ornament, and aristocracy completely changed the trend of English poetry as well as, it replaced the elaborate classical sensibility of Pope and Dryden with a new Romantic sensibility. In this way, Wordsworth launched Romantic era opening the gates for later writers such as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron in England. As Wordsworth defines the theory related to the theme of poetry in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*; we find the same principles in his poem "The Solitary Reaper" :

Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland Lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound. (Barrow 47)

The poem begins with the poet asking readers to see a young Scottish girl who is reaping grain while singing a sad song. Therefore, he advises the passerby either listen to her song or go away silently, so that she may not be disturbed. The poet says that the highland girl cuts and binds the grain in sheaves alone. She is jubilant in her song as well as in her work. With the melody of her song the whole deep valley is also echoing. In this captured moment, she is the sole companion of Nature and in total communion with it. Her voice fills the distances, creating this enchanting music.

Wordsworth expressed his democratic view towards mankind by this simple Scottish maiden, who happens to be the central character of the poem. In his own words, he chooses incident from humble and common life as the themes for his poetry. Wordsworth rejects the idea of language as artificial metre and figures of speech as embellishments of the language. He justifies its use only when they are naturally suggested by passion unlike supposed ornaments. In a nutshell, genuine feeling cannot be communicated with the help of aristocratic speech, but with the actual speech of human being. The rustic people express their feelings and emotions through simple, unelaborated and unsophisticated way. Their language is more passionate, more vivid and more emphatic. The language of the rustics, according to William Wordsworth is more philosophical and permanent than the language used by the city dwellers and the earlier poets. As Wordsworth advocated the use of language in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* :

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. (Hutchinson 734)

In the same manner Wordsworth secondly defines the theory related to the language of poetry in “The Solitary Reaper” in context of his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. He deals with humble and rustic life and so he uses the language of the rustics, farmers, shepherds and those are the subjects of his poetry. The language of these men should be used but it must be purified of all painful or disgusting, vulgar and coarse in that language. He uses the language of real men because the aim of a poet is to give pleasure and such language without selection will cause disgust and depression. The following stanza of “The Solitary Reaper” reflects this :

No nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travellers in some shady haunt,  
Among Arabian sands:  
A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard

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In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,  
 Breaking the silence of the seas  
 Among the farthest Hebrides. (Barrow 47)

In the given lines the poet compares the sweet voice of the girl to that of a nightingale. The poet says that no nightingale has so far sung as melodious song as the girl sings. When some group of tired travellers reach a shady place, in the Arabian deserts, the nightingale welcomes them with its sweet song. He says that such a sweet voice was never heard from the cuckoo even in the spring season. The song of cuckoo is always very sweet but the voice of the girl, who was singing, was sweeter than that of the cuckoos. However, the enchanting melody makes Wordsworth's imagination set to work. The language used by the poet is simple, since there isn't any artificial or poetic diction; it is natural and unforced.

Likewise Wordsworth also defines the theory of the concept of poet. The poet is not an isolated man setting in an ivory tower and contemplating mankind in the abstract. 'He is a man speaking to men' (Hutchinson 737); he is a man among men writing about mankind's interest. Thus the nature of a poet is not different from common men. Here Wordsworth is able to see into the inner reality of the heart of things :

he is a man speaking to men – a man (it is true)  
 endued with more lively sensibilities, more  
 enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater  
 knowledge of human nature, and a more  
 comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be  
 common among mankind; a man pleased with his  
 own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more  
 than other men in the spirit of life that is in him,  
 delighting to contemplate similar volitions and  
 passions as manifested in the going on of the  
 universe, and habitually impelled to create them  
 where he does not find them. ( 737)

Wordsworth's statement that the poet can create passions in the external world shows that the poet's mind has something like the creative power of nature unlike Sidney's imitative poet. For instance, the same idea is used in "The Daffodils" when the poet takes the memory of the field of daffodils with him to cheer him up on bad days. So the poem is not only about Scotland, it is about loneliness. Here the solitary reaper is singing, and so is Wordsworth;

Will no one tell me what she sings?—  
 Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
 For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
 And battles long ago:  
 Or is it some more humble lay,  
 Familiar matter of to-day?  
 Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
 That has been, and may be again? (Barrow 47)

In these lines the poet tells us about the language of the song which he does not understand. But the poet tries to guess the language and the meaning of the song. He says that perhaps the girl is singing about some sad song of the past, some unhappy song or perhaps about events that have taken place in the past or the battles which have been fought in the far off past. The poet again guesses at the theme. Perhaps she is singing a simple song on some ordinary matter of the present day or the incident of loss or pain has taken place in the past and it may happen again in future. In the end, the poet appreciates the tone of the song, its expressive beauty and its mood.

And at last, Wordsworth defines the theory related to poetry. Thus, poetry, to Wordsworth, is a powerful media of supplying knowledge and pleasure to mankind. He considers that man and nature are essentially adapted to each other. Therefore, man has emotional, philosophical, moral and spiritual connection to nature. The poet's business is to describe human life in its very form and to establish a relationship between man and universe. So, Wordsworth says that poetry is the first and last of all knowledge – it is as immortal as the heart of man. Thus Wordsworth elaborately describes the function of poetry and of the poet in his critical essay *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. In both the cases he avoids classical tendencies and adopts romantic attitude. He defines poetic :

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 disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (Hutchinson 740)

Poetry should express common human feelings. There should be no restriction in the expression of the experiences of the senses and sensibilities. Therefore, he opines that poetry is the image of man and nature. It is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe. Likewise, the last stanza of "The Solitary Reaper" has such a great impression on the poet, that even when he mounts

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up the hill and cannot hear anymore the girl's song, he still keeps it in his heart. And as the poet carries the girl's song with him up the hill, we carry with them the fluid expressive beauty of the poem, as well as that 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (740) that Wordsworth identified as the heart of poetic expression, long after the poem is read :

...As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending;—  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more. (Barrow 47-48)

These are the concluding lines of the poem. He says whatever theme she sang, irrespective of that, it seemed that the song of the young girl would not come to an end. The poet says that he saw the girl busy at her work and also singing while reaping with a sickle in bent motion. The poet says that at first he listened to her song standing still and motionless and he mounted up the hill of Scotland. The tune of the song was so sweet that it struck the heart of the poet. He was so impressed that he carried the melody of the song with him long after the song was ended by the girl. Actually, the poet, being a poet of nature, was profoundly impressed by this natural scene. The poem ends as the poet understands that whatever the girl sings about does not matter. It is the beauty of the song and her singing that touches his heart and lingers in his mind, giving him joy as he travels up the hill and carries her song with him long after the song comes to an end.

By placing this praise and this beauty in a rustic, natural setting, and by establishing as its source a simple rustic girl, Wordsworth acts on the values of *Lyrical Ballads*. Additionally, the final two lines of the poem (The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more) return its focus to the familiar theme of memory, and the soothing effect of beautiful memories on human thoughts and feelings. It reflects Wordsworth's belief in the importance of the natural world, the power of memory and the human mind, and his first principle of poetry: that poetry should be written to provide pleasure through a rhythmic and powerful expression of emotion and leave readers with 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings long after it is read. The poem is simple yet romantic, pure yet serene. There is no art in the poem but imaginary and magical-musical tone is sufficient enough to make the readers go into depth of Wordsworth's poetry.

To conclude, Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* proved landmark in the history of English literature. It is also labelled as "unofficial manifesto of Romantic Movement". The year of the publication of *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*



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in 1798 began to be known as Romantic Age. Wordsworth changed the taste of the audience who were addicted to the traditional values and taste of the Classical Age by writing the preface. In this regard, the above elaborated poem, “The Solitary Reaper” is the most valid and the best example of Wordsworth’s theory of poetry in context of the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*.

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