



De-Romanticizing Wordsworth's Effigy of 'Nature' and 'Femininity' in *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*: An Eco-Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Romanticism, as a poetic manoeuvre, has always been equated by literary scholars and associated intellectuals with the phrases, 'return to nature'; 'revival of the golden age'; 'willing suspension of disbelief'; and 'spontaneous overflow of powerful sentiments'. Romantic critics rarely debate outside the circumference of the individual adorning the external green cosmos, and the rhetorically embellished expressions of the personal emotions of the poet. However, with the acclaimed advances in literary theories, the modern, contemporary critics, while analyzing the text and the context, deconstruct the effigies of 'Nature' and 'Woman' devised by the author's pen, which has been a keen area of eco-feminist studies. This paper attempts to de-romanticize the poetic quests of William Wordsworth – the pioneer of the Romantic era, along with S.T. Coleridge, and the Poet-Laureate succeeding Southey – more prominently, his *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*, from an eco-feminist perspective. Although the poet does not remark highly on his thoughts on gender issues, despite the decade witnessing the dawn of feminism with *Vindication*, the poet's portrayal of 'Woman' temperament amongst the green of 'Nature' has aroused eco-feminist critics' attention. The research scrutinizing the psyche of Wordsworth, and the personal emotions of the poet, de-romanticizes the idyllic landscape and the poised woman in the pastures as the victims of culture; and masculinity – both of which have sculptured the former into effigies of appreciation, adornment, and adoption.



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Introduction

“We see then in nature devoid of reason only a fortunate sister, who remained behind in the maternal home, out of which we stormed in the high spirits of our freedom into foreign parts. With painful desire, we long to return thence, as soon as we’ve begun to experience the distress of culture and hear in the foreign country of art, the moving voice of the mother. So long as we were merely children of nature, we were happy and perfect; we have become free and have lost both”. (Schiller)

From demarcating distinct boundaries of ‘naïve’ and ‘sentimental poetry’, and highlighting the increased estrangement of Man from the motherly warmth of the external cosmos to equating the association of Man-Nature to that of Brother-sister, or Son-Mother – Friedrich Schiller, much prior to the advent of Romanticism, let alone Ecocriticism, undeniably lays the foundations of what Françoise d’Eaubonne coined as ‘ecofeminism’. Often considered by the modern critic as a sub-branch of the studies of ecological criticism that interpreted the relationship of human society with its physical environment, Ecofeminism, in precise terms, “argues that patriarchal society’s values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature” (Nayar, 340). M.H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, explicates Ecofeminism as “the analysis of role attributed to women in fantasies of natural environment by male authors, as well as the study of specifically feminine conceptions of the environment in the neglected nature writings by the female authors” (Abrams, 98).

Explicating the terminology with a broader perspective, d’Eaubonne writes in *Feminism or Death*, “Practically everyone knows that the two most immediate threats of death are overpopulation and the destruction of natural resources; fewer are aware of the entire responsibility of the male system. Having seized the control of soil and the mother’s womb, it was logical that the overexploitation of the one and the other would result in the double peril: a glut of births and a glut of products” (d’Eaubonne, 167). It appears quite intriguing that although modern critics do possibly trace the bare bones of Ecofeminism back to the words of Schiller in his essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, the German philosopher attempted to pave the way for the ‘new’ sentimental poetry, or the Romantic poetry. Locating chronologically, the era of Romanticism commenced post the Age of Prose and Reason, and prior to the Victorian period; therefore, in between reason and science, do literary intellectuals place the period of Romantic literature. A glance at the socio-cultural and political context of the contemporary era reveals to

the critical eye the impact of two prominent events that led to the articulation of what the critics address as the Romantic period: the French Revolution of 1789 and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. The determination for a state that promised 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' to all its citizens, devoid of the probable bars of discrimination, that began with the notes of justice and harmony to all, ended up with the frolics of death and anarchy. In addition to the political turbulence of the age, one observes the Industrial Revolution spreading its roots to the eminent circles of European society. It was amidst these social and political upheavals that William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge emerged on the literary scene with their *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798, embarking on a 'new' venture for British literature, by transforming the spirit of poetry from being 'a mirror of society' to 'emotions recollected in tranquility'.

Although William Blake, with his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, had already paved the way for Romanticism to penetrate into the socio-cultural gamut of the contemporary psyche, it was with the publication of the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* that agitated the Neo-classicists and stirred a debate that remains controversial till date. Wordsworth's resoluteness to embrace the poetic genre of literature, as a product of "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and an expression of the "emotions recollected in tranquility," has been the nucleus of subsequent literary criticisms and accusations, from Thomas Love Peacock in *The Four Ages of Poetry*, to Eliot in *Tradition and Individual Talent*. Extracting common place events from the lives of 'ordinary men and women', with a language exhibiting minimal ornamentations, and exploring the rusticity of Man in Nature – *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* acknowledged Romanticism as a bridge to reconnect Man with his inner self through imagination and subjectivity; and, at the same time, associate him with the enigmatic cosmos surrounding Man in the form of Nature.

However, it is with this perspective of Wordsworth, as the poet-philosopher illustrates in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, that he has been equally accused of the politics and cultural conflicts of the era. Taking into consideration the turbulent waves of revolution hitting the European civilization, the critical eye not only encounters in the pages of history, Wordsworth's visit to France as a graduate in 1792, which prompted in the young mind the idea of Romanticism, but also a possible contemplation on gender issues with the publication of the seminal treatise of Mary Wollstonecraft in the same year, 1792. At this juncture, one shall not hesitate to negate, therefore, the assertion that William Wordsworth and his Romantic imagination remained remote from the political and socio-cultural scenarios of the time. The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth, quite intriguingly, weaves the biographical details of the Poet Laureate

succeeding Robert Southey, not only as a Man who was orphaned at the age of thirteen, graduated with” no more than an unclassified BA from Cambridge”, and remained yet, a financially-insecure poet despite the evolving association with S.T. Coleridge and a recognized founder of the ‘Lake School of Poetry’; but also, as a personality who could be studied as “a republican who laid plans for a radical monthly called the *Philanthropist*, and may have been involved in a liberal London weekly of that name, as an author of the oppositional political tracts, and of an unpublished letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, written in defence of the regicide in France and rights of man at home” (Cambridge,5).

Therefore, one gets certain of Wordsworth, not walking on the idealistic roads of manners. His active participation in politics keeps the poet grounded in the roots of reality. However, what appears bewildering to the literary critics remains a controversy to be analyzed. Despite the seeds of feminism witnessing their dawn at the brink of the Enlightenment that have been advocated by Burney novels, the critical reader fails to scrutinize Wordsworth’s position at this juncture of ecology and femininity. Although Michael Foucault claims the poet to be anti-feminist in his attitude and individuality, the literary critics hesitate to support any argument regarding Wordsworth’s stance owing to his own individual portrayal of Dorothy and Lucy, and the female gender in general.

De-Romanticizing the Text and the Context of *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*

Barbour, in the research “Between Two Worlds: The Structure of the Argument in *Tintern Abbey*”, commenting on the diverse criticism *Tintern Abbey* calls, writes, “In general, critics have looked upon the poem much as a great Elizabethan landowner saw a dissolved monastery: as an attractive ruin whose beautifully dressed stones could be carried off and put to better purposes” (Barbour). What appears intriguing is that although Barbour aimed to deconstruct the religious beliefs of Wordsworth in his cited research, yet eco-critics and feminist scholars view in the light of Barbour’s argument observes Wordsworth as the landowner who has arrived after “five long summers”, and equally “long winters” back to the dissolved architect, not to trade, but to contemplate on the prices Man has bargained in the process of thriving in the chaos of culture and masculinity.

The serenity of the “dark sycamore”; the “orchard-tufts with unripe fruits”; “sportive wood” running wild; “pastoral farms”; and the enigmatic smoke that probably sources itself from the woods of the “vagrant dwellers”, or the “Hermit’s cave” – all of these that unify in the

panorama the poet visions standing at the infinite hub of Nature, at the banks of Wye, arouses in the him complicated emotions that traverse across the realms of time, memory and space. Not only does Wordsworth appear to be mesmerized by the glimpse, but the critical eye also observes the poet being obliged to the motherly warmth the green cosmos provides in the hours of weariness amidst the “towns and cities”. The poet beholds:

“I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration” (*Tintern Abbey*)

The detailed description of the idyllic landscape William Wordsworth nurtures in his poetic quest, however, appears to be complicated as the venture progresses, highlighting the advances of the poet in mentality, maturity, and meaning. Delegating the calm and untamed Nature as the locus of his growth and upswing. From being the “roe” which would bound over hills and mountains; be amused by the flowing streams of water bodies; afraid of the hidden enigma life and circumstance holds; impassioned by the “sounding cataract”; and, experiencing the charm of the “the tall rock, the mountain, and the deep an gloomy wood, Their colours and their forms” to being the recipient of “other gifts” that were capable of “abundant recompense” – William Wordsworth, not only traces the trajectory of his mature being in comparison to his past self, but also glorifies the Nature as his “anchor”; “nurse”; “guide”; and “guardian” of his heart, soul and moral being. (*Tintern Abbey*)

The moment the poet captures Nature in the form of nurse and guardian, the critical eye immediately associates it with being his ‘Mother’; and the ‘provider’ of the motherly warmth, of which Wordsworth has been bereaved of in his quest to discover the potentialities of the urbanscape. However, the argument does not bewilder the critical reader, as the poet has addressed the forces of Nature equal to his Mother, or the feminine figure of benevolence and motherhood, prominently in *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Immortality Ode*. The phrases employed in both of these verses in the form of “Mother Earth” and “homely nurse” evince what the critical reader appears to be suggestive of. However, what is the prime locus of

discussion is not the explication of the idyllic landscape that Wordsworth envisions, or the playfulness of memory and feelings, but significantly Wordsworth's application of Natural forces to highlight the loss of the innocence in Man, for which he has to return to his Mother; and the weight of industrialization the age is seeking after, which in a way is exploiting the ravishing the maternity of Nature, as Schiller had remarked –“So long as we were merely children of nature, we were happy and perfect; we have become free, and have lost both” (Schiller).

Until this juncture, one finds only the presence of eco-critical elements that could be deconstructed by literary scholars with the view of Man harassing the ecological equilibrium, and illustrating it only as an unvoiced, unheard recipient of Man's gluttony; however, the eco-feminist elements are traced with the culminating stanzas of *Tintern Abbey* with the summoning of Dorothy Wordsworth. It appears quite intriguing that although, the critical reader does not witness the disposition of the Poet in the selected poetic marvels of William Wordsworth as tyrannical, and authoritative, rather the Poet manifests his 'self' as an observer of the beauty of his human, and non-human counterpart, and at the same time seeks solace and relief from the chaos of 'culture' and 'masculinity' in the warm company of the 'nature' and 'femininity'. An intricate and meticulous reading of *Tintern Abbey* corroborates the aforementioned argument of Wordsworth standing at the blurring boundaries of feminism and anti-feminism.

Although the Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth reveals the poet appreciating Women's writing and their efforts to emerge from the confines of domesticity and private space to the public arena, the illustration the poet carves on the panorama of his idyllic landscape stirs ambiguity amongst literary scholars and intellectuals. John Powell Ward, in the research entitled “Will No One Tell Me What She Sings?: Women and Gender in the Poetry of William Wordsworth,” argues, “Again, it is feminists, such as Anne Mellor and Mary Jacobus, who have alerted Wordsworth critics to crucial aspects of his work scarcely considered before. Nevertheless, the now prevailing view is that Wordsworth rendered his poetry's women silent if not brain dead in order to make a male voice predominate” (Ward).

The critic, continuing his argument, cites Anne Mellor, who asserted that Wordsworth “stole from women their primary cultural authority as the experts in delicate, tender feelings and, by extension, moral purity and goodness” (Ward). A glance at *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*, and the critical eye is evinced by Mellor's argument; and, also observes the portrayal of Nature as delicate, serene and pure – equal to the disposition of a woman, therefore sculpturing the effigies of 'Nature' and 'Woman', where both are unvoiced, secluded and adorned for their physical

manifestations, by the Man who has wandered the roads of reason, freedom and industries in the urbanscape, similar to Wordsworth. Scrutinizing from this perspective, the critical eye ceases to remember the Romantic chasm, and the element of self-reflection, and subsequently de-romanticizes the effigies constructed by Wordsworth of Nature and Woman, who are then to be understood as victims of ‘culture’ and ‘Man’.

Literary critics often underline the thematic and artistic fusion of the Wordsworthian poem, despite its apparent clarity and distinct rhetoric, as ambiguous and perplexing, for the author probably might have overlooked the structure of the work as more of a riddle, with contradictory opinions on the primary theme concerning the text. “Albert S. Gerard has described the structure of the poem as a pattern of ascent and descent which is repeated twice: ascent towards the loftiest heights of mystical speculation, descent towards the firm ground of ascertained fact” (Nabholz). Caught in a predicament by the critical reader, dodging between memories, reality, and the emotions the future beholds, one fails to identify Wordsworth’s true intention of revisiting the tranquility of the banks of the Wye, and subsequently composing these lines a few miles above Tintern Abbey.

Tracing back the historical context of the time Wordsworth was articulating this poem, *The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth* informs the critical eye about the aimless wanderings of the Poet, post his excursion to France, in the different corners of the city, and his controversial lodgings with Dorothy, his sister. William Wordsworth has often been accused by literary critics and scholars of incorporating the crucial sentiments of Dorothy, penned down by the lady in her journal entries, as a significant substance of his poem – very much evident in the contextual analysis of *Daffodils*. It appears quite intriguing that years later, during the rise of Modern Novel, Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, devises the imaginary Judith Shakespeare, as the sister of William Shakespeare, who was devoid of expression owing to the patriarchal foundations of the society; in the case of Wordsworth, and Dorothy, the critical eye equates the fictional instance of Woolf as the fact of Wordsworth’s life. “Some feminist criticism has focused on William’s alleged theft of Dorothy’s ideas and images from the journals and on his preventing her from pursuing her own career as a writer. However, it is hard to argue that Dorothy missed out on a writing career for her devotion, but it is certainly true that she sacrificed herself as a woman to William’s vocational desires” (Cambridge,138).

Identifying Nature with Dorothy, not only does Wordsworth establish a balanced equation of Nature with femininity, but also poses to exercise what could be addressed as an

anthropocentric approach to Nature, as the Masculine domination of the feminine. It appears quite intriguing that although the poet does not record in his rhetorical statement any hue of oppression, and that his affection towards his sibling is undeniably immense, yet the silence of Dorothy and her brother's address to the moon and the wild ecstasies that would unite with Dorothy's desires provoke controversy at the feminist stance of William Wordsworth. Yet, how far Wordsworth remained to be opportunistic and self-absorbed; one appears to be dubious, for the culminating stanzas of *Tintern Abbey* address the affection of Wordsworth and Dorothy by the poet. Nabholz in "The Integrity of Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*" comments at this juncture, "The majority of the readers have seen this section as a disturbingly long postscript of 'anticlimax' to the true climax of the poem, the famous affirmation of unity and love of nature, and have argued that this section represents Wordsworth's attempt to convince himself of a faith in nature which in fact he knows to be not true" (Nabholz).

The critic continues that, quite similar to the other poems belonging to the poetical canon of William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey* might be principally emphasizing the progress of the human mind, which initially acknowledged its dependence on Nature's femininity, and subsequently recognizes its superiority over it. William Wordsworth, having wandered in solitude, had apparently found in his renewed relationship with Dorothy a domestic refuge. From the Lake District and Germany to Grasmere, their association with one another and with the creative aspect of artistic creation developed and became the prominent angle of Dorothy's *Grasmere Journals*. However, historical data reveal that the months spent with Dorothy in Germany altered the course of direction for Wordsworth's poetic quests. Separated from England with Dorothy in a town named Goslar, according to critics, it was in this phase of life that Wordsworth's identity was cultivated to its most mature terms. There have been certain speculations by critics that the Goslar people considered William to be Dorothy's lover. Wordsworth's recent biographer, Kenneth Johnston, advocating the trains of the speculations, contemplated the *Lucy Poems* to be the product of this unacknowledged tension.

The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth notes, "the period of German isolation and alienation influenced Wordsworth not only in reformulating his English identity but in embracing the conviction that his only home could be England, thus the merging of his patriotic and domestic love" (Cambridge,128). One can perceive the conjunction as the interconnection of masculinity and femininity – the English culture that upholds patriarchy, and the familial bond of Dorothy that is sought as a refuge by Wordsworth. However, the

composition of Lucy Poems was indeed layered by the “emotional foundations of Wordsworth’s relationship with Dorothy”, yet the critical reader appears to be suspicious of the origins of the poetic piece, adhering to Matlak’s research in “Wordsworth’s *Lucy Poems* in Psychobiographical Context”.

The critic, advocating the trails of Bateson take note of, “Wordsworth’s relationship with Dorothy was probably stifling and inhibitive at the time of *Lucy Poems*’ composition.” Matlak further writes, “The consequence of Wordsworth’s depression for his work was the fantasy of Dorothy’s death in the Lucy poems. Wordsworth both loved and wished to get rid of her because of the serious inconvenience of her presence, and the Lucy poems formed as an expression of this ambivalence. Lucy became not so much an exact equivalent of Dorothy as an amorphous and thus safe object for the hospitalities Dorothy aroused” (Matlak). The leading verse entitled *Strange Fits of Passion* the anxiousness of Wordsworth is deconstructed not only with the absence of the female effigy of Nature, but also with the metaphor of the ‘sinking moon’ the poet visions while his journey to Lucy’s cottage. Equating the femininity of Lucy with the beauty and freshness of a rose, yet the ‘strangeness’ of Wordsworth’s passion for the female figure appears to invoke a sense of queer in the ambience, formulating the ballad.

The evening moon, neighing horse, illusory dream of the poet, and the descending moon – all of the instances end up with the assumption of Lucy’s death, and the poet remaining in his anxiety and strange fits of passion. While analyzing the eco-feminist elements in the first section, one can assert the sinking Moon and the evening time as the setting of Nature, while Man is within the urbanscape. Such a reading is further suggested by the next verse, *She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways* – as the poet writes;

“A violet by a mossy stone

Half-hidden from the eye!

Fair as a star, when only one

Is shining in the sky” (*Lucy Poems*)

Inhabiting a locale that remains ‘untrodden’, Lucy’s residence is analyzed to be at the margins of the city that is central to the Dove’s river; and with the above-mentioned words, the poet positions Nature and Culture at complementary levels. With the appreciation of Nature, it, at the

same time, brings on the surface the mossy stone of the dissolved monastery that takes the form of Industries and the contaminated urbanscape. Nonetheless, it is with the fourth section of the Lucy poems titled, “*Three Years she Grew in Sun and Shower*” that Wordsworth skillfully and distinctly equates and associates the effigies of ‘Nature’ and ‘Woman’.

“Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower

Then Nature said, ‘A lovelier flower’

On earth was never sown

This child I to myself will take;

She shall be mine, and I will make

A lady of my own” (*Lucy Poems*)

With the culminating lines of the fifth section, the equation of ‘Nature’ and ‘Woman’ appears to be balanced; for Lucy’s death now transforms ‘her’ identity with the motions of time, memory, and space. One can then at this juncture assume Wordsworth’s stance against the gender roles of femininity – a child of Nature, who is manifested with the powers of the Nature, and whose death brings her one with the Nature; and for masculinity – a son of Nature, who is manifested with the ‘care’ and ‘resources’ of the Nature, who is liberated from his accountability to stabilize Nature, but will never attempt to unify owing to the superiority of his being.

Conclusion

There have been ample interpretations regarding the identity of Lucy – the speculations of the abstract being associated with Dorothy, or as Annette Vallon, or as an English maiden that had caught sight of Wordsworth amidst the pastures of the English green fields – yet, due to a lack of certain historical evidence, Wordsworthian critics fail to recognize the identity of Lucy. However, as far as the eco-feminist elements are concerned, one can undeniably assert the Poet’s anxiety; the solace in the arms of Nature; and the serenity of femininity as the circumscribing stance for Wordsworth to equate Nature with Woman. A re-visitation to a few other verses of the poet, be it *Nutting*, *The Solitary Reaper*, or the *Prelude* – the critical reader not only comprehends a lop-sided affection of the Poet towards the effigies he has constructed, but also the Man as an observer to the functioning of Nature. And, as far as the female figures are concerned, the critical reader

finds them to be mute, unvoiced, and ornamented as the substance of adornment and appreciation, without having a voice of their own. What Wordsworth, therefore, romanticizes as a venture into a deeper self that is expressed in “emotions recollected in tranquility” are then, when viewed from the eco-feminist perspective, not confined to figures that the critical reader can appreciate and glorify.

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