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Ecology in Wordsworth's Poetry Ms.Binita Vijay Gheewala*

Wordsworth's in his poems brings up ecological concept that natural ecosystem is a household in which human beings and the living creatures play an essential role. In his poems Wordsworth portrays ecological concepts with the sentiments of a local resident who observes the natural world and discovers the relations of all creatures, the inter-relationship between human and their living environment, and man's participation in the natural world and his respect for the integrity of living things in his native habitat. Wordsworth's opinion concerning man's relation with nature is very different from the prevalent ideas of the eighteenth century. Wordsworth was ahead of his time. When writing poetry, Wordsworth values highly not only the natural world but also its close relation with man and the human community.

The subject that Wordsworth chooses for his poetry is the lives of common people, especially "low and rustic" people, and their connection with the natural world. Consequently, Wordsworth is interested in man, nature and especially their interactive relations. In Wordsworth's poetry, we see many ecological ideas man's adaptation to his habitats, the close relationship between people and nature, and the catastrophic results of people's intervention with the natural world. He firmly opposed the method of rational inquiry and the separation between man and nature. Rather, he reminded people of their inseparable affinity with the objects in the natural world. This uniqueness is expressed in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* together with Coleridge. They bring poetry within the reach of the average person by writing the verses using normal everyday language and the best manifesto of this call is well exhibited in *Expostulation and Reply* the first poem in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*. This poem sets itself against the eighteenth –century worldview in which "books are the main repositories of knowledge, and sight is the primary modality of perception"¹. The poem suggests that there are other ways of learning. At the beginning of *Expostulation and Reply* the schoolmaster, Matthew, chides a wayward student: Why William, on that old grey stone,/Thus for the length of half a day,/Why, William, sit you thus alone,/And dream your time away?²

Matthew, influenced by the traditional scientific inquiry, believes that science is the accumulated knowledge of humans and books, since scientific knowledge is conveyed in written books, contain all knowledge yet William provides another way of learning. Through William's words, Wordsworth intends to point out the limitation of the rational inquiry of knowledge and suggest that knowledge is based not only upon book- learning like the schoolmaster who "encourages his students to engage

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in an active 'seeking of knowledge.'³ Rather knowledge is like a conversation that 'exchange with things that surrounds us, not a prescription for the results of rational inquiry.'⁴ This idea is clearly elaborated in the last stanza of the poem. William converses with the natural objects in his living environment as his way of obtaining knowledge. Through his interaction with the natural world, he is an active participant in the living world. In this sense, his bond with the living world is interactive and interrelated. Consequently, this point of view was distinct from that of his time. Another poem by Wordsworth, *The Tables Turned* though expressing the same theme as *Expostulation and Reply*, furthermore shows Wordsworth's objection to the conventional way of learning. In this poem, apart from the book-learning knowledge, the narrator describes other ways of learning through nature. For example, the narrator depicts how the sun casts light upon the surrounding fields and woodland linnet sings sweet songs. The perceiving from the surrounding fields teaches the narrator to perceive something other than "the cold, hard objects of Newtonian science and to receive something more worthwhile than mere determinate knowledge"⁵ Through his interaction with the natural world, the narrator gains much from nature and establishes a harmonious bond with the environment.

Wordsworth's poetry often evokes a speaker who is engaged in the places he describes and exhibits a dynamic world in which people live in harmony with the natural environment. For example in *To a Butterfly* Wordsworth describes one of his childhood experiences in chasing a butterfly; Oh! pleasant, pleasant were the days,/The time ,when in our childish plays /My sister Emmeline and I /Together chaced the butterfly!⁶

In his intimate contact with this living creature, Wordsworth was an involved participant in the world that surrounds him and kept an interactive bond with the natural object. This sense of interaction between man and nature is also repeated in Wordsworth retrospect of his childhood experiences in *The Prelude* .For instance, in Book one Wordsworth depicts the experience of his bathing in the river Derwent and sporting along its bank .In his experience in nature, the boy Wordsworth was not a stranger to the places that surround him and regarded the natural objects such as rivers, hills, streams, and mountains as his companions or playmates. There are also other childhood experiences such as the snaring of the woodcock ,the climbing for raven's egg, and the stolen boat episode, that also show his intimate interaction with the natural world.

Besides this sense of participation in nature, Wordsworth is also concerned with the relations between human community and the natural world. He shows his deep concerns in many poems such as "The Female Vagrant," "Micheal," and "The Last of the Flock." Here, I would like to take "The Female Vagrant" as an example to illustrate Wordsworth's concerns about human beings' relations with their living

Saarth

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environment. At the beginning of this poem, the Female Vagrant recollects the tradition, agriculture based community in which she lived before the radical changes, such as the enclosure movement, took place in her rural society. There are numerous plants and flowers in her garden. She breeds poultry and raises sheep and cow for the daily necessities of her family and the market. Her father also keeps bees at home and fishes in a lake on the commons. In a word, they live on a multiple mode of subsistence and rely much on the natural environment for their livelihood. However, this rural community is destroyed by the intrusion of a wealthy landowner who buys and encloses land and erects mansion among the ancient cottages: "Then rose a mansion proud our woods among,/ And cottage after cottage owned its sway,/No joy to see a neighbouring house or stray/Through pastures not his own, the master took;/My Father dared his greedy wish gainsay;/ He loved his old hereditary nook,/ And ill could I thought of such sad parting brook."⁷Because of the enclosure, the wealthy landowner deprives the Female Vagrant and her father of their hereditary lands and their rights on the commons. Later, their situation becomes worse due to the war. They are, in the end, thrown out of their home and live in suffering. Although this poem, in a sense, implies political concerns such as the calamities of the war, it also conveys the idea that Wordsworth remains consistent in his opposition to radical changes which have altered the traditional rural community upon which human beings are closely dependent. Wordsworth's concept of ecology is also expressed in *Home at Grasmere*. Grasmere Vale is a place consists of ecological wholeness. With openness he is consciously able to reintegrate his being into the rhythms of natural existence by articulating his unique individuality. This poem narrates the arrival of Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in Grasmere in 1799 with the intention to settle in Dove cottage and to make their home there. In this poem, Grasmere is described as an ideal place where man lives in harmony with the natural world and the poet wishes to establish a close tie with the village residents and all the living creatures. At the beginning of this poem Grasmere is described as an ideal community. In this community people are content with what they own and work hard in the society they take what they want from the natural resources for their daily commodities and keep a harmonious relationship with the natural environment. After having settled in this place, Wordsworth observes everything that surrounds him and gradually incorporates himself into this place in his participation in the community. Wordsworth notes the self-sufficient mode of subsistence among the local residents and admires the cooperative relations among cottage residents: "society is here/a true community-a genuine frame/of many into one incorporate."⁸This sense of cooperation is not only felt among the rural residents, it also extends to the animal community. For example, Wordsworth depicts "the small grey horse that bears / the paralytic man".⁹There is an interaction between man and living creatures. Furthermore, Wordsworth expresses his ecological concern by

Saarth

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drawing our attention to the disappearance of a lonely pair of swans. Wordsworth guesses the reason of their absence: "the Dalesman may have aimed the deadly tube at them"¹⁰. In regard to the absence of the swans, Wordsworth seems pessimistic. However, there is a way to maintain the relationship between the human community and the wild creatures in this district. "It is the power of overflowing love / Not for the Creatures only, but for all / That is around them, love for everything/ which in this happy Region they behold!"¹¹ To Wordsworth, this love must extend itself beyond the love for humans only. Wordsworth asserts the importance of man's role in maintaining a harmonious relationship with his dwelling surroundings and considers Grasmere a place where human beings and the living creatures are dependent upon each other.

In *Lines Written in Early Spring* Wordsworth sees all around him the work of nature while sitting in a grove hearing the songs of many birds. The birds sing, the flower grows and both appear to take a joy in living. Nature is so much alive that he finds natural objects in possession of human senses. The sense of natural delight is so overwhelming that it throws into something which the poet has been very concerned. He is concerned with human and his alienation from nature. For this change man is responsible for imbalance between man and nature. Further in poem *The Tables turned* Wordsworth also discuss the ethics of animal dissection in biology classes and animal rights. We murder to dissect./ Enough of science and of Art; / Close up those barren leaves; / Come forth, and bring with you a heart/That watches and receives."¹²

In the haunting warning, Wordsworth captures the essence of the Romantic Movement more clearly and briefly than any other poet. It is not a protest against science and rationalism but rather recognition that science and rationalism can lose the forest for the trees.

At the end of *Guide to the Lakes*, a prose poem by Wordsworth proposes an appropriate way for man to maintain a harmonious relationship with the environment by advocating that we human beings should "deem the district a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy"¹³ Here we can see, Wordsworth expresses his ecological concern by stating that human beings should treat their natural regions as if they were their kin so that the natural environment can benefit human community, and human kind, in return, can settle in their living environment without causing any damage. Ecological reading of his poems perhaps can help us get a more moderate attitude toward nature and this is the purpose of this paper.

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