

# The Enlightenment of Wordsworth's Ecological View of Nature to Modern Society

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**Abstract:** William Wordsworth, as one of the greatest poets in the 19th century British romantic literature, creates a large number of excellent poems with the important theme of nature in his life. Wordsworth is also widely known as the “nature poet”, and his poems reflect his unique ecological view of nature with different spiritual meanings and humanistic connotations. This paper analyzes the ecological view of nature in Wordsworth's poetry and its enlightenment to the modern society. Man and nature are inseparable organisms. We should re-understand nature, attach importance to it and cherish it sincerely so as to realize the harmonious unity between man and nature.

## 1. Introduction

William Wordsworth is the main founder of English romantic poetry in the 19th century, and the ecological view of nature contained in his poetry has far-reaching influence. His poetic language is simple and novel [1], and he believes that “All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” [2]. Wordsworth writes a large number of poems praising nature in his life. He believes that nature is a whole and the soul of the world is nature. The object of his poems is to call on people to respect and return to nature, and realize that man and nature should be in harmony and unity.

At present, the global ecological crisis is becoming increasingly serious. On the one hand, the natural environment has been severely damaged in certain areas. And on the other hand, people's lives and the sustainable and healthy development of the different countries are being threatened. The increasingly serious ecological crisis is an important factor in destroying the harmonious relationship between man and nature, causing the disharmony between man and nature. Wordsworth sees the spirit and value of nature against the background of modern civilization. “For the poet himself, the contact with nature not only makes him recover from the wounds of the world, it keeps him pure and quiet, guides him to see the inner side of life, and makes him a kinder and more compassionate person”[3]. Through his poems, he calls on human beings to return to nature, endow nature with sacred and noble values, and reshape the relationship between human beings and nature. Therefore, the reconstruction of the moral relationship between man and nature is actually Wordsworth's vision of the relationship between modern man and nature.

The return to nature he calls for is not only the return of human behaviours, but also the return of the human soul. Since the Industrial Revolution, increasingly serious ecological crisis caused by human beings' ruthless plunder of nature has led to the decline of human's spiritual world. This setback in the development of human civilization must be paid attention to. Therefore, human beings must re-examine their relationship with nature, so as to permanently protect the ecological environment on which human beings depend for survival. Through the interpretation of the ecological view in Wordsworth's poetry, this paper explores its enlightenment to modern society.

## **2. The Formation of Wordsworth's Ecological View of Nature**

In Wordsworth's eye, nature is a very noble existence, and he is even a devout believer in nature. So where does Wordsworth's ecological view of nature come from? It is not difficult to find that it is closely related to his growing experience and the social reform of the time.

### **2.1. The Writing of Images in Nature**

At the age of nine, Wordsworth left his birthplace, a small town near the river, to go to school in a small town in Lancashire and board with Mrs. Tyson. Mrs. Tyson was very open-minded and allowed him to play in the fields or by the lake. It was very convenient for Wordsworth. He could get close to nature. These intimate experiences with nature laid the foundation for his love of nature and provided inspiration for his poetry. In his poems, Wordsworth generally describes daffodils, the moon, cuckoos, mountain girls and so on. At the same time, he did not hesitate to describe these natural scenes. He believed that all beauty comes from nature and all truth, goodness and beauty are the products of natural cultivation. He even had a devotion to nature, which is the home of his spirit and soul. From the point of view of eco-literature, the outstanding achievement of Wordsworth's poetry lies in "obedience to the good influence of nature".[4] Wordsworth was aware not only of the pureness and beauty of nature, but of the mysterious power of it, especially under the influence of city life and higher education.

### **2.2. The Dilemma of Modern Thinking**

Wordsworth entered Cambridge in 1787 at the age of 17, but he hated the unhealthy atmosphere at the university. He had hoped to improve himself in a city school, but now he felt confused. During the French Revolution, he yearned for its slogans: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. However, he was troubled by the power of the party and the relationship between powers. The natural scenery of his hometown soothed his wounded heart, so he returned to his hometown and returned to nature with its beautiful scenery. At the same time, the French Revolution also inspired the poet's perception of nature. With the advent of the English Revolution, Wordsworth found that it brought about serious problems: the ecological balance was destroyed and the human spirit bound. In the modern industrial society, the relationship between man and nature has deteriorated. In view of the above realistic problems, Wordsworth reflected on nature and endowed it with lofty value. Thus it can be seen that Wordsworth's worship of ecological nature is the result of his serious thinking after he saw the problems brought about to human beings by the Industrial Revolution.

### **2.3. The Clash of Ideas at the Time**

Wordsworth's ecological view of nature is not only influenced by his own life experience and the Industrial Revolution, but also closely related to animism and Rousseau's view of nature. Animism originated in ancient Greece, the belief that the soul exists in everything in nature. As a romantic poet, Wordsworth's view of nature was deeply influenced by it. Animism inspired his poetry, and his conception of nature worship was also influenced by animism. Rousseau's thought of returning to nature also influenced Wordsworth. As an outstanding educator and enlightenment thinker in the 18th century, Rousseau pursued the return to nature all his life. Wordsworth was influenced by the enlightenment thinkers in Cambridge University, and Rousseau's idea of returning to nature unconsciously influenced him. His works, whether Lyrical Ballads or The Prelude, his autobiography, are novel and readable.[5] As is noted above, Wordsworth returned home disillusioned with the Industrial Revolution and largely influenced by Rousseau. From this point of view, the starting point of his reflection on the ecological view of nature is Rousseau's thought.

## **3. An Interpretation of Wordsworth's Ecological View of Nature**

Wordsworth is the typical representative of romantic poets. Romanticism has two different aspects, with essence and dregs, which is an extremely complicated phenomenon. Romantic poetry is edgy. Romantic idealism, with its strong expression, expresses the yearning of human beings for

their own liberation, reveals the true feelings of human beings around the world, and leaves a large number of excellent works and poems for later generations. Wordsworth's performance and achievements stand out among the representatives of romanticism. He had the courage to experiment with new language, rather than using commonly-used words, and pursued simplicity without rigidity. Therefore, Wordsworth's work is very new and memorable to readers. From his disillusionment of revolutionary ideals to the firm return to his hometown, he recognized the magical power of nature and believed that nature had a mysterious and noble spirit that could soothe his wounded heart and he created a steady stream of masterpieces. Wordsworth's ecological view of nature retains the following four aspects.

### **3.1. Emotion Coming from Natural Ecology**

In his Tintern Abbey, Wordsworth describes the sight of the banks of the Wye after many years and expresses his deep feelings by using the word "again" many times. "How often has my spirit turned to thee!" "How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee"[6]! The poem is very impressive, especially the line:

"In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being."[7]

Disappointed as he was while returning home, he was not only very generous in his appreciation of natural beauty, but he became more rational and thoughtful. He reached the realm of the unity of man and nature, so to speak. Man and nature are harmonious, or they blend with each other. People can harvest peace, relaxation and love from nature, and even enjoy the spiritual world. Nature can purify and enrich people's spiritual world. Nature, being the most common matter that has its own soul, is the unity of all souls in the whole universe. When people feel bored and lonely in the noisy urban life, they can resolutely embrace nature, and reap a sense of peace and meaning from nature. The nature Wordsworth sought was a sacred place, a place free from pain, sadness and loneliness, a place full of kindness, beauty and hope. Compared with other art forms, poetry is more expressive and uses more varied artistic techniques. Poetry "often uses emotional stimulation to make people like or dislike something, make people live smarter, and make people develop spiritually."[8] In Wordsworth's opinion, a poet needs a keen sensibility if he wants to observe how things are perceived in the human mind, rather than as what they are. He believes poetry can not only inspire compassion, but also bring joy to people. That people have this kind of happiness shows that they have recognized the beauty of the universe.

### **3.2. Good Poetry Coming from Meditation on Nature**

Wordsworth believes that everything in the universe is spiritual and deeply affects the human mind. Poetry is a natural outpouring of human emotion, which can be seen in his constant creative inspiration after returning to his hometown. This outpouring of emotion comes from what is recollected in tranquillity. Wordsworth portrays an image of a hard-working worker in the poem "The Solitary Reaper" the solitary Highland Lass sings folk songs alone while cutting and binding the grain. Her beautiful singing penetrates into people's hearts, bringing hope to them. Wordsworth believes that human beings have a compassionate nature and that poetry can stimulate that nature through pleasure. The spirit of poetry gives people in the world sympathy and strong feelings, and makes them feel the world with true love. "He is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time."[9] At this time, people can not only observe the surface beauty of nature, but also experience deep emotions. Wordsworth believes that meditation can help poets feel and deeply analyze emotional value. He believes that poetry is the natural expression of people's true feelings, feelings that stem from memories, and that meditation can make these feelings more sincere.

### **3.3. The Function of Poetry Being to Cultivate People's Healthy Natural Emotions**

Under the influence of Rousseau's return to nature, Wordsworth believes that capitalist urban advancement has destroyed the nature of human beings, and there is almost no sincere emotion between people. If you want to restore a pure relationship, you must embrace nature. At the beginning of the French Revolution, Wordsworth craved more genuine emotion. However, when he saw the damage caused by the revolution, he was disappointed. With the help of his friends, he accepted a legacy annuity to secure his old age and truly return to nature. Compared with other poets of his time, Wordsworth is the best at describing nature, expressing and praising it deeply. In his works, he directly expresses his love for nature by contrast, hoping to bring the beautiful nature to readers. Wordsworth's poems are mainly about natural scenery and material things. There are no magnificent or steep desert, but just flowers, trees, birds, girls and so on. His descriptions of waterfalls, wild roses and greeneries all use anthropomorphic techniques to express his noble love for nature, endowing nature with mysterious power.

### **3.4. The Formation of Poetry Coming from the Rhythm of Nature**

Wordsworth understands from classicism that the emotions expressed in poetry have musical influence, and that this sense of music is very beneficial to the poet's expression of emotions. The sense of musicality used in prose produces a continuous and very small sensation, which may not be appreciated by readers in the same way as the natural rhythm of poetry. The rhythmic poetry often confuses deep feeling with pain. In vivid poetry, one can feel satisfied from the beautiful rhythm. Rhythm is very valuable for the suppression of emotion in poetry. Wordsworth believes that poetry should not only be about great and important events, but also about nature, so he often chooses the humble pastoral life as his subject matter. He says in Preface to Lyrical Ballads, in the humble pastoral life, 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; because in this kind of life, people's elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.

## **4. The Significance of Wordsworth's Ecological View of Nature to Modern Society: Return to Nature**

Wordsworth strongly expresses his view of nature in his poems, which is quite different from that of contemporary people in a way. His "worship" of nature is shocking and it is a forward-looking prophecy. After the outbreak of the French Revolution, mankind indeed made a big step forward to the new era. However, when mankind gained wealth from the revolution, it also faced serious problems such as the exhaustion of natural resources and the depression of human's spiritual world. In view of these problems, Wordsworth places a high and sacred value on the material giver and spiritual comforter of mankind, namely, nature. In today's society, the ecological dilemma faced by human beings is similar to the harm caused to the environment by the industrial advancement of Wordsworth's time. From this perspective, the ecological view of nature contained in Wordsworth's poetry is a great enlightenment to our modern society.

### **4.1. A New Understanding of Nature**

After the Industrial Revolution, with the progress of science and technology and the continuous improvement of productivity, human beings are hurting the resource-giving nature in a "civilized" way. In order to develop industry, natural resources are constantly exploited and utilized, which leads to the practical problem of shortage of natural resources. Now that natural resources have been destroyed beyond self-repair, a serious ecological crisis has ensued. Nowadays, climate warming, sandstorms and other natural disasters almost strike everywhere. Man has completely destroyed nature and made it lose its original appearance. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, human beings took nature as an object of conquest, and nature exploded under human destruction. Therefore, we should re-understand nature, attaching importance to it. Wordsworth's

ecological view of nature has left us a spirit that we should always pay attention to nature and cherish it sincerely. This spirit is very meaningful. Wordsworth holds that we should closely combine man and nature, forming a comprehensive relationship between them. His ecological view of nature inspires people to realize the value of nature, and realize their own responsibility, namely, full of awe to nature, in this comprehensive relationship. This is the potential significance of Wordsworth's poetry. This potential significance not only guided the human beings at that time, but also has great enlightenment for modern times.

#### **4.2. Rebuilding the Community between Man and Nature**

In his poetry, Wordsworth describes the relationship between man and nature as a whole. Man's feeling curious, sensitive, longing and grateful towards nature. There exists a noble ecological ethics in the community between man and nature, and what we need today is this ethical relationship. Since the 20th century, China has made great progress in science and technology, and mankind is creating social wealth and spiritual civilization at a high speed. While mankind enjoys this achievement, the earth and the ecological environment are also severely damaged. Desertification, global warming and other problems can not be remedied overnight. This is a strong warning to mankind and this alarm has sounded. The whole world has realized the seriousness of this problem, and adopted a lot of protection measures, such as the promulgations of many laws to protect ecological resources, the deep thought about how to realize the harmonious unity between man and nature, thus ecological ethics has come into being. Ecological ethics is a moral norm that regulates the way and method of human dealing with various natural resources. At its core is respect for nature. It emphasizes mankind's concern for nature and shows the original morality of mankind. Man and nature are inseparable organisms. When humans harm nature, they harm themselves. Wordsworth's poetry is still important for modern society with its reverence for nature. The premise of human existence is to protect nature.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Wordsworth resists man's wanton slaughter of nature through the ecological view of nature contained in his poetry. The relationship between man and nature has been elevated to the height of ethics, and the alarm bell of reverence for nature has been sounded for mankind. Mankind should realize that the relationship between man and nature is an integral whole, and the fate of man and nature is closely linked. We should respect nature. Only when human beings live in a beautiful nature can they be truly happy.

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