

Wordsworth as a Moral Teacher

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Abstract:

William Wordsworth was a great moral teacher and this fact has been accepted widely by many critics of his time. It has been proved by many of his poems. As we come to know that Plato was concerned with moral exaltation, Aristotle with that of pleasure, Longinus that of transport, Sidney with teaching and delighting, and Wordsworth with the problem of 'preaching' in a work of art. Wordsworth prominently regarded the poet as a 'seer' who can see things as they really are. A seer has that potential to see things more truly and more clearly than the common man. Wordsworth did constant and persistent efforts to stimulate his reader's feelings and thoughts for the simple way of living, for such life as was led by poor cottagers and shepherds. Wordsworth prominently emphasized on the unity of all life. According to him the same divine spirit worked within all creatures. Wordsworth's belief was that man becomes noble by pursuing the path of Duty, Morality and Simplicity. Wordsworth was against the gross materialism and sordid pursuits of life. Wordsworth's teaching to lovers was unique. According to him lovers should love the soul of the beloved, rather than be motivated by a physical appetite. Wordsworth, however, breathes the air of optimism in his poems which leads man to Resolution and Independence. He never hopes for the worse, rather hopes ever for the better. According to Wordsworth nature can be a perfect teacher of Man if properly attended to. The present paper focuses on the moral teaching in Wordsworth poetry. It also highlights his materialistic society, worshipping nature, his sympathy for down-trodden, his principle live and let live, unity of all life, his noble path, his teaching to lovers and his optimism.

Keywords:- Wordsworth, morality, abstract, intuitive, beautiful, landscape.

Wordsworth was a great moral teacher and this fact has been accepted widely by many critics of his time. It has been proved by many of his poems. Wordsworth once remarked, 'Every great poet is a teacher ; I wish either to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing.' He was neither like Pope expressing foreign thoughts into a flowery language; nor like Homer, Shakespeare and Milton standing at distance from their own wonderful creations. He was neither like Shelley "beating in the void his luminous wings in vain," nor like Keats reveling in his sensations. He was pre-eminently the poet of 'Man, Nature and Human life'. He was, therefore, concerned with mankind and their life. He wanted to uplift man from the common level of life and for that it was necessary to make them learn moral note. According to Arnold the greatness of a poet arises from his profound and noble application of ideas to life. Now Wordsworth's superiority lies in the fact of his powerful application to his subject, in his best poetry, of moral ideas, 'on man, on nature and on human life.' By the word 'moral' he does not mean any system of thought or belief. He applied the word 'moral' in a broader sense. As a matter of fact, the question "How to live?" is a moral question and to answer this question is to apply moral ideas to life. "Great poets like Milton, Shakespeare and Keats have always answered this question, and so in their poetry there is a profound and noble application of ideas to life. Highest poetry is at bottom a criticism of life, and we get such a criticism, such as application of moral ideas to life, in the poetry of Wordsworth. In the opinion of Arnold, "A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life."¹

As we come to know that Plato was concerned with moral exaltation, Aristotle with that of pleasure, Longinus that of transport, Sidney with teaching and delighting, and Wordsworth with the problem of 'preaching' in a work of art. For him the poetry is an art for life's sake and not for art's sake. Wordsworth had much in his heart for the betterment of humanity at large. So many poets, who regarded Wordsworth as a 'pure poet', are baffled by his preaching and efforts for the betterment of humanity. "Wordsworth pointed out the purpose and function of poetry in one of his letter to Lady Beaumont. In that letter he wrote that the purpose of poetry was "to console the afflicted, to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier, to

teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and to feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous.”²

Wordsworth prominently regarded the poet as a ‘seer’ who can see things as they really are. A seer has that potential to see things more truly and more clearly than the common man. Nevertheless, he thought of him not as a law – giver, neither as a pleasure-giving agent, but as a truly didactic man. The growing industrial cities, the abundance of materialistic resources, the big factories and workshops were all the more aggravating the moral degradation of man. This evil materialistic tendency was also noticed by Arnold and he complained of it in memorable words as “strange disease of modern times,” ‘The world is too much with us’ of Wordsworth was just a protest against the money – minded modern society. Wordsworth frequently imparts by now and then the moral lesson to his readers. So, he may be regarded a teacher in many respects, nevertheless, he did not develop any particular scientific system of thought, so he is to be regarded as a greater poet applying moral ideas to life.

Wordsworth, as a teacher teaches us to worship Nature as we can have real pleasure only if we go to nature. Nature has the potentialities that can soothe our feelings. Mankind may learn lesson from Nature - the lesson of nobility and morality:

“One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the Sages can.”

The more one gets closer to Nature, the more happy one becomes; the farther one goes from her, the worse one becomes. Wordsworth’s prominent glory as a great poet lies in his dealing with the aspect of Nature. He is the poet of man and nature at the same time. But it is not that he was a poet of nature for a certain period and then turned to be a poet of man. It has been appropriately said of him that it was “the love of nature that led him to the love of man.”

Wordsworth did constant and persistent efforts to stimulate his reader’s feelings and thoughts for the simple way of living, for such life as was led by poor cottagers and shepherds. He tried his best to evoke our sympathy for the down-trodden and sweeten our feelings for them. “He believed, and taught accordingly that man could reach God by ‘loving his fellow-men. We are created by the same Almighty power. So, there should be no feeling of caste, creed or sex among human beings. One becomes great not by one’s glorious deeds, especially in the performance of one’s duties.”³ He did not believe in the Darwin’s “the survival of the fittest” as the materialistic resources, the big factories, transportation, industrial hub and workshops in the modern time all belong to the rich people of the society and they are comfortably enjoying their lives manipulating and exploiting the poor workers who appear to be unfit for survival in this materialistic society. He believed, on the contrary, in the principle ‘live and let live’ This is the reason why he left believing in the high-sounding, but empty ideals of the French Revolution.

Wordsworth prominently emphasized on the unity of all life. According to him the same divine spirit worked within all creatures. He believed that man’s spirit is part and parcel of the Divine Spirit. He honored even the simplest and the commonest objects of Nature and human life. To Wordsworth, nothing was mean or low, because there is a divine force working in the souls of all creatures. “Wordsworth was not only a poet, he was also a seer and a mystic and a practical psychologist with an amazingly subtle mind and an unusual capacity for feeling.”⁴ So, we may find nobody is distinctly inferior to any worldly superior personage. As a result, one becomes great by virtue of one’s spiritual attainments, and not by one’s material possessions. He exhorted his readers and pleaded to lead a virtuous and stainless life. He was on the side of the moralist in describing the primary function of poetry. He undoubtedly liked to be pleased by it but not at the cost of his spiritual and moral concerns. Even in his selection of the rustic heroes for his poems, Wordsworth’s concern for morality is evident. Since these innocent creatures stayed in the lap of nature, open, benign and blessed,

he made them the theme of his poems. He was humanist at heart and his poems are colored by a strong sense of humanism; which becomes clear when we keep in mind such utterances of his as the following:

“Love had he found in huts where poor men lie,
This daily teachers had been woods and rills.
The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lovely hills.”

The loves to paint personages like the beggar, the unambitious dalesman, the simple solitary reaper, shepherds, cottagers, and hut-dwellers. Here we remember Shelley. Both championed the cause of the sufferers, down-trodden and the unprivileged class.

Wordsworth's belief was that man becomes noble by pursuing the path of Duty, Morality and Simplicity. The matter of fact is that he did not side with the landlords or the capitalists. He obviously criticized the ruling class for its indifference to the fate of the dispossessed people. He sang of the love of independence among the small farmers and shepherds of England. It is from them that he drew spiritual strength in the midst of his own sufferings. He chose rustics and shepherds as the subjects of his poems, for they embodied the qualities of simplicity, labor, tolerance, courage, hope and openness of heart. These people were the embodiments of morality and wisdom, the monitors of human life and nature. He emphasized the moral side of his rustic heroes and cast them in an idealized shape, and created them with Godly sympathy. “Crompton-Rickett has rightly observed in this regard,” Just as in Nature Wordsworth is always eager to pass from the concrete to the abstract, so in dealing with humanity he is less concerned with individuals than with certain qualities common to mankind.”⁵ In ‘Ode to Duty’ the poet stresses the readers to follow the path of Duty since for the dutiful:

“Serene will be our days and bright
And happy will our nature be
When love is an unerring light,
And joy its own security.”

Wordsworth was against the gross materialism and sordid pursuits of life. He aspired human beings to keep away from the ills of industrial life and industrious money-earning. ‘The World is too much with us’ is a strong protest against such a life led by the people. He thought and felt that man should look to Nature for his salvation. We find Wordsworth in his poetry as a true and faithful spokesman of nature. He regarded Nature as the real source of not only joys, pleasures, beautiful scenes, senses and sounds, but also a soother for the afflicted, a teacher for the erring humanity and a companion who never did betray the heart that loved her. He treated Nature as a living soul, permeating power and a storehouse of sacred virtues. One could never fall into immortality if one lived in constant touch with Nature. This is well expressed in the sonnet, ‘The World is too much with us.’ Wordsworth's concern for morality is evident.

Wordsworth's teaching to lovers was unique. According to him lovers should love the soul of the beloved, rather than be motivated by a physical appetite. He never favored and approved of the stormy or sinful side of love i.e. physical attraction. He insisted on the controlling passion. In ‘Laodamia,’ we have the following lines:

“Be taught, O faithful consort, to control
Rebellious passion: for the gods approve
The depth, and not the tumult of the soul.”

Wordsworth, however, breathes the air of optimism in his poems which leads man to Resolution and Independence. He never hopes for the worse, rather hopes ever for the better. It was possible because he believed that life in spite of many hurdles leading to despair is worth living. He never has given up himself in his noble cause. He is gay and gloomy, happy and unhappy at the same time. He has been assailed by ‘fears and fancies’ simultaneously. The old man in, ‘Resolution and Independence,’ is a seasoned person and does

not complain of his fate. He tells the poet of his misery, distress, of non availability of leeches, with all dignity and resignation. He does not lose the control and balance of his mind. The title itself applies to the leech gatherer, who is pursuing his work so persistently and who is leading the life of a free man. The poet aims at the revelation of the old man's character in a stylistic fashion. Here we find that the poet never gave up his noble cause. It is a sort of optimism the poet breathes through his poems. Even if suffering emerges in the life of man, suffering visits him with an ethical end. "The still, sad music of humanity is neither harsh nor grating, and has ample power to chasten and subdue."⁶

According to Wordsworth nature can be a perfect teacher of Man if properly attended to. This is the burden of Wordsworth's lyric 'The Education of Nature,' wherein he asks mankind - 'Let Nature be thy teacher.' He, obviously, thinks of nature as the real resort of an unmixed joy, and dedicates his body and soul to this benign influence and blessed power. He criticized man's growing greed for money and exhorts him to seek refuge in the lap of Nature - "Little we see in Nature that is ours." He appears to be hardly satisfied with beautiful sights of landscape for their own sake, rather looks to nature to hear "the still, sad music of humanity," and his portrayal of man seen against a background of nature gives rise to some of his best known poems, such as 'The Solitary Reaper, Resolution and Independence and Michael.' These figures have something of the strength, dignity of their settings. Arnold has observed of Wordsworth and that is literally true. "Nature not only gave him the matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him."

Conclusion:

At the end, it may be concluded that Nature is a moral teacher to Wordsworth in two ways. When he makes her a conscious moral teacher, he speaks of it in an abstract, unpoetic way as in 'The Prelude.' The best of Wordsworth's nature poetry is intuitive where he feels man's relation with the living objects of Nature. He is the poet not of abstract nature, but of concrete nature of England - the companion of farmers and shepherds - a great moral teacher. Nevertheless, Wordsworth developed no scientific system of thoughts like a teacher in the real sense of the terms. Hence, he is to be regarded as a great poet than a teacher.

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