

Existence of Women in Wordsworth's Poems

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Abstract:

This article is an attempt to bring to light the women in the poems of Wordsworth, who with his innovative ability has captured the minds of literary readers even now. Though he belongs to the Romantic Age, his poems do not fail to provide the soothing effect while reading in this present era. The study of his poems reveals the importance given to women in his life and the researcher has found three distinct types of women in Wordsworth's life, namely i) the wedded wives and unmarried mothers who have been deserted by their husbands and lovers respectively; ii) the thrifty, industrious and devoted wives; and (iii) the children of Nature, moulded into beauty and innocence by the influence of the healthy surroundings in which they grow up. In the whole gallery of his portraits of women, there is not a single instance of cynical or satirical representation. Wordsworth, lived on terms of frank intellectuality with his sister and his wife, and habitually sought their criticism of his writings. He is the poet of sorrow and suffering, not of sin or vice. The lapses that he depicts are not the offsprings of immorality or profligacy, but of a temporary weakness, a momentary impulse. The woman is carried on the crest of a high wave of genuine passion; at worst she is only guilty of imprudence and want of caution. Women is the victim of sin, not the sinner, she is sinned against than sinning herself.

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William Wordsworth was one of the founders of English Romanticism and one of its most central figures and important intellects says “Our business is with their books – to understand and to enjoy them”, speaking of authors in a letter ‘to a friend of Burns’. “And of poets more especially it is true- that if their works be good, they contain’ within themselves all that necessary to their being comprehended and relished.” We cannot however, extend to Wordsworth “this affectionate amnesty,” because his life and his work are so inextricably bound together that it impossible to speak of the one without reference to the other. They are commentaries on each other, and have, therefore, to be studied together. Three women of whom we know a good deal play an important part in his life, and therefore in his poetry. They are Annette Vallon, Marry Hutchinson, later Mary Wordsworth, and Dorothy Wordsworth.

Annette Vallon was the daughter of a French physician of Blois. Wordsworth met her at Orleans in December, 1791. He was then a warm-blooded young man of twenty-one who had just left the university. Everything predisposed him to dream of love. Austerity was alien to his education. In his native Westmoreland he had participated in all-night dance and revelry with “slight shocks of young love-liking interspersed,” the pleasure of which “mounted to the head and tingled” through the veins. (*The Prelude IV* 317-19). At Cambridge he had consorted with bon vivants. He gratefully acknowledges that all through life he was “Unchecked by innocence too delicate, And moral notions too intolerant”. (339-40) Passion prevailed over prudence, and when Annette left Orleans for Blois a few months later in the spring of 1792, she carried about her “the promise of a mother” though she was “yet without the name of wife.” (Vaudracour and Julia 48).

In December 1792, his natural daughter Caroline was born. We must remember that though Wordsworth lived anachronistically into the Victorian era, he was really a Georgian and that the standard of morality in the last years of the eighteenth century was not very high. Within a few days after the birth of his child Wordsworth returned to England. His next meeting with Annette and Caroline took place only in August 1802. Much had happened in the long interval. He had gradually drifted away from the French woman, who did not speak his language, who was deaf to his verses, and unaccustomed to rural life.

Wordsworth’s need for feminine companionship was in the meantime supplied by his sister. He had also met and gradually lost his heart to Mary Hutchinson to whom he had become betrothed before he left for France. The four weeks’ stay with Annette and Caroline was marked but with no outbursts of passion or transports of affection. Dorothy had accompanied her brother as chaperon to play the part of propriety. It was

a meeting to effect the parting of the old, and facilitate the marriage of the new lovers. Thirty-six year old, monarchist, town-bred, French, Annette must herself have realized that a marriage was impossible between her and grand republican, the priest of Nature's inner shrine, and a dedicated spirit, the English of her child. The whole story ended without ill-feeling, with a certain sweetness veiled by a shadow of sadness.

From the forsaken mistress we turn to the married wife. Mary Hutchinson was a friend of Wordsworth's childhood. She had been his school-fellow at the Penrith Dame's school. In a passage in one of the manuscripts of *The Prelude* (Book XII) omitted from the authorized version of the poem (1850) he refers to her as "the maid to whom were breathed my first fond vows." This suggests that Mary Hutchinson was, in fact, the poet's first love. In *Beauty and Moonlight, an Ode* (Fragment), written probably, as de Selincourt suggests, "on returning to school from Penrith after the summer holiday, 1786" the poet is already seen to be "fancy-bound" by Mary. He wanders over the "silver rocks" in hopes of driving the thoughts of Mary from his mind but wherever he looks, he sees her beautiful form, and he calls upon an indulgent god to bear him to his love, whose "bosom soft and white" may "heave upon his swimming sight." (262)

There is no doubt that he told Mary about Annette, and that his visit to France was intended, partly at least, to bid farewell to the latter. The delay in the marriage must have been due to pecuniary difficulties. By May 1802, she was betrothed to him. In his *A Farewell* composed on May 29, 1802, just before he and Dorothy went to fetch Mary from Gallowhill, he promised his dear cottage and garden that they would shortly return with "Her who will be ours."

Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson on October 4, 1802. The marriage, says Myers, "was the crowning stroke of Wordsworth's felicity – the poetic recompense for his steady advocacy of all simple and noble things." She was the "choicest boon" with which Cumberland requited him who had set forth its people as types of the true dignity and delicacy of rustic life. She was "A gentle Maid, whose heart is lowly bred, Whose pleasures are in wild fields gathered, With joyousness, and with a thoughtful cheer." (*A Farewell*)

She was not perhaps what the world would call 'fair;' but she was endowed with true beauty, that of the soul, which discloses itself only to loving eyes. To him she was "dearer far than light and life are dear." The more he knew her, the more he appreciated her quiet unobtrusive worth. She who was at first but "a lovely apparition sent to be a moment's ornament" turned out on "nearer view" to be not only a "spirit" but a "woman" too, "a creature not too bright or good for human nature's daily food." And, finally, when he saw the very pulsations of her being, he discovered in her a life-

companion, “a perfect woman, nobly planned to warn, to comfort and command.” The poet pays her an almost identical tribute in the last book of *The Prelude* (XIV. 266-275).

Mary, he once said, was to his ear the most musical and most truly English in sound of all the names we have. “The name was of harmonious omen.” The two beautiful sonnets that he wrote in 1841 on his wife’s portrait by Miss Gillies show how much “her large heart and humble mind” had done for the blessedness of her home.

But she was not merely a good housewife. Her intellectual gifts and literary tastes were no mean an order. With him she read Spenser and showed a full understanding appreciation of his *Faerie Queen*. She also helped Wordsworth in his vocation. She transcribed one of the manuscripts of *The Prelude* for him, and with Dorothy made a duplicate copy of Wordsworth’s poems for Coleridge, in 1804. It was she who gave to *The Prelude*, after the poet’s death, the name by which it is known today. But the surest testimony of her poetic appreciativeness consists in the two best lines in *The Daffodils* “They flash upon that inward eye, Which is the bliss of solitude” which, according to Wordsworth, were her contribution.

Without pressing the point too far, it may be stated that the success of his own marriage must have helped him to draw the several portraits of good wives and housewives which his poems present. Isabel, wife of old Michael, was “a woman of a stirring life, whose heart was in her house” (*Michael* 81), The wife of the Clergyman, described by the Pastor (*The Excursion VII*) and the wives of the Solitary (*The Excursion III*), the Pastor and the Vicar etc. We now turn to the poet’s sister, Dorothy Wordsworth. From the days of their infancy when they in “childish play” “together chased the butterfly,” the brother and the sister were deeply attached to each other. William loved her with a “Violence of affection,” and he often expressed it in the language of the passionate lover”. To the ordinary human brotherliness, he super-added “some genuinely lover-like quality, some touch of spiritual passion” (Wordsworth’s *Lucy*). Equally strong was her affection for him. She could not describe him without “launching into panegyric.” In her Grasmere journal he is always “My beloved,” and no woman ever spoke of her sweetheart or husband with a deeper or more tender love.

“The character of Dorothy Wordsworth,” says Morley, “has long taken its place in the gallery of admirable and devoted women who have inspired the work and the thoughts of great men.” Few women have received tributes so universal and so deserved. All who knew her sang her praises, Coleridge, Lamb, De Quincey, Samuel Rogers and a host of others. Her literary gifts are amply evidenced by her letters and her journal. She was a poet at heart with a poet’s vision and sense of beauty, and a poet’s ear. Her gift of observation, and of receiving impressions enriched the work of her brother.

Wordsworth has fully and repeatedly acknowledged his debt to her and Dorothy looms into heroic dimensions in his poetry *The Recluse and The Sparrow Nest*. The passages in which he refers to his companionship with her and his debt to her are too numerous for enumeration; they are among the most deeply moving in all his poetry. We have seen how the Annette episode has influenced Wordsworth's work. If the French lady is indirectly the inspirer of the poems in which he portrays the forsaken woman and the unmarried mother, Mary Hutchinson and Dorothy Wordsworth have their counterparts in the numerous specimens of innocent girlhood and of nature's children scattered among his work.

Like the poet himself, whose mother had the faith that He "Who fills the mother's breast with innocent milk, Doth also for our noblest part provide, Under his great correction and control", (274) the girls of his creation are left free to be brought up and educated by the best of teachers, Nature. They grow up in "thoughtless freedom, bold," (*Ruth* 43) wandering over dale and hill, communing with their own thoughts and with the sights, sounds and silences of the world around them.

The most important of these children of Nature is the mysterious Lucy. The identity of Lucy has baffled Wordsworth's biographers and critics. Some think that she might have been a Hawkeshead girl to whom Wordsworth in his early youth lost his heart. Others identify her with Annette; Selincourt suggests that Marry Hutchinson must have been the inspirer of these poems. Garrod, without claiming to establish her identity, admits that Lucy-hunting has driven him to Dorothy, and Catherine Macdonald Maclean is "convinced" by intuition as well as reasoning that Lucy is Dorothy. There are five Lucy poems: "*Strange Fits of Passion have I Known*," "*She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways*," "*I Travelled Among Unknown Men*", "*Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower*" and "*A Slumber did My Spirit Seal*." They were written in Germany in 1799. Along with these we must consider also "*Among all Lovely All Things My Love had been*" (1802) and *Louisa* (1805). Lucy is an English girl dwelling in a secluded and lonely dale with none to admire her and few to love her. She is fresh as a rose in June and fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky. "Her whole being is moulded by Nature's self; she is responsive to sun and shadow, to silence and to sound, and she melts almost into an impersonation of a Cumbrian valley's peace." (Myers)

Lucy dies in the bloom of her youth, making her lover's premonitions real, and leaving him in solitude and despair. This is the substance of the Lucy poems. The womanhood presented in her is not unlike that of the poet's sister, for whom, as we have already seen he had an affection not unlike the warmer feeling lover for his sweetheart.

Dorothy's own education and moulding were not much dissimilar. Nature had influenced her in the same way as it had done the when he first came among the hills

near Tintern Abbey. If Lucy was not Dorothy, these parallel passages go to show that there was much in common between them.

But Lucy is the only one, though the loveliest, of the numerous children of nature that Wordsworth's poems present to us. She belongs to a very prolific family. Of the sisters of Lucy, the pride of place should be given to the Highland girl.

The glimpse of the girl became a romance to Wordsworth and he commemorated it in *The Highland Girl* written on his return from Scotland, and several years later in *The Three Cottage Girls* (1820). In his seventy-third year he says that the prophecy with which the earlier poem concludes, that the vision of the girl as he saw her at first would never fade out of his mind, was realized. A.C. Bradley says, "The Lucy poems are not poems of passion, in the usual sense, but they are love poems." His early poems on Mary are undoubtedly poems of passion and of love.

A study of the women in the poems of Wordsworth, therefore, leads us to three distinct types: i) the wedded wives and unmarried mothers who have been deserted by their husbands and lovers respectively; ii) the thrifty, industrious and devoted wives; and (iii) the children of Nature, moulded into beauty and innocence by the influence of the healthy surroundings in which they grow up. In the whole gallery of his portraits of women, there is not a single instance of cynical or satirical representation. He has nothing of that half-contemptuous assumption of man's superiority which marks the poet of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Milton is said to have turned his daughters into literary drugs; Wordsworth, on the other hand, lived on terms of frank intellectuality with his sister and his wife, and habitually sought their criticism of his writings. It is true that Wordsworth has given us instances of youthful transgression on the part of women. But nowhere does he place the emphasis on the offence itself. From the guilt he turns to the affliction of the guilty person. He is the poet of sorrow and suffering, not of sin or vice. The lapses that he depicts are not the offsprings of immorality or profligacy but of a temporary weakness, a momentary impulse. The woman is carried on the crest of a high wave of genuine passion; at worst she is only guilty of imprudence and want of caution. The man, on the other hand, is the pleasure-seeker and the lawless lover, the betrayer and the breaker of vows. Women is the victim of sin, not the sinner, she is sinned against than sinning herself. For the rest, Wordsworth has only types of unswerving loyalty and devotion, of diligence and economy, of sweetness and innocence. No poet has painted a more flattering picture of the sex than he.

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