

The Pedagogy of Nature: Imagination and Moral Growth in Wordsworth's Thought

Muskan

Independent Scholar, English, Miranda House, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Email – muskanswami731@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper examines William Wordsworth's critique of 18th-century Enlightenment education and his assertion that Nature acts as the supreme teacher for moral and imaginative development. Drawing heavily from *The Prelude*, Wordsworth rejects the formal schooling of his time—typified by institutions like Cambridge—which overemphasised reason, facts, and utilitarian objectives (mathematics and science), arguing these methods were "anti-imaginative" and stunted the natural growth of the child's soul. He advocates for a Natural Education where direct experiences with the environment—mountains, lakes, and daily life—cultivate true morality and foster the creative imagination, which he considers the essential faculty for self-comprehension and poetic creation, effectively positioning the outdoors as his true school where the 'passions of mankind' are authentically learned.

Key Terms: Romanticism, Wordsworthian Educational Theory, Natural Education, Enlightenment Rationalism, Imagination, Childhood and Learning, Experiential Pedagogy.

Let Nature be your Teacher.

—William Wordsworth, *The Table Turned*

William Wordsworth, the most famous Romantic Poet, critic of the Enlightenment Age, and harbinger of emotions, feelings, and imagination to society, in doing so, Nature plays the quintessential role as a teacher. He critiques the Age of Reason and comments on the contemporary Education system. He claims that this Education relies on reason and facts that captivate and hinder the creative faculty of the mind. " Wordsworth confronted a phenomenon of his age that transcended any single individual, and that the poet opposed the contemporary educational theory as he believed the direction was anti-imaginative and totalitarian "(Joel Morkan). He condemns the contemporary education theories as he finds them useless when he encountered the French Revolution. He finds himself unable to discern a solution to this moral difficulty through his empirical study of mathematics and science, and he descends into despair. Hence, he turns to nature. He propagates his educational thinking through his writings, " *The Prelude*" or "*The Growth of a Poet's Mind*" (1799, 1805, 1850). His autobiographical account is one such example. James Fotheringham in " Wordsworth's *Prelude*: as a study of Education", states that, "*The Prelude* can be seen as a study of Education that tells Wordsworthian Educational theory through his autobiographical account."

Wordsworth takes the child as the primary concern in his work for his educational theory. " He critiques the formal education, attacking the curriculum of Hawkshead Grammar School, a highly prestigious institution of the time, that concentrates mainly on Mathematics and Science, as "*The Prelude*" records in Book One. He condemns the purpose of this mathematical training as being to prepare him for success at Cambridge University. He objects to the materialization of Education, where hardly any scope for creativity and learning. Some Critics claim that" Wordsworth protests against the ideological construction of childhood by envisioning an ideology-proof organic sensibility, a move which tends to leave the child unsocialized and frozen in a state of eternal innocence". He criticizes that this formal education based on utilitarian ideology narrows the scope of learning for a child. Though he is thankful to his headmaster Taylor, who provides him good grounding in classics, that steers his interest in poetry later which really helps him in learning. For Wordsworth, Education means growth and development that helps in the unfolding of human nature, rather a deliberate training according to social and cultural norms. As he himself defines education in a letter to his friend Hugh James Rose, though loosely, ' Education, I needn't remark to you, is everything that draws out human being, of which tuition, the teaching of schools, especially however important, is comparatively an insignificant part. This

suggests that he doesn't support the school system of advancing intellectual prowess, hurting the natural sensibility of a child.

Likewise, Wordsworth critiques the Cambridge University System when he goes to St. John's College (1781-1791) (Book Three in "*The Prelude*"), which is more advanced in science, algebra, geometry and Newtonian Physics. He represents Cambridge as, "coldly mechanical world". He criticizes the Cambridge for academic race, syllabus, political interference in the system, rioting and dissolute pleasures and socialization, a futile activity for which students attend parties, drink and obsess with clothes, etc. Thackeray, studying at Cambridge, admits that there is literally no time for work, what with dressing all morning and drinking all afternoon and evening. Coleridge, Wordsworth's friend, himself says that the universities are homes of 'vicious habits' and unsustained acts of degradation. Wordsworth finds the formal university education as disappointment that is merely able to prepare students clerics preparing for competitive exams. "Examinations, when the man was weighed, as in a balance, which bred vicious rivalries as well as widespread laziness" ("*The Prelude*" 1805, Book three). He disapproves of Cambridge as a hallowed institution that satisfies the utilitarian philosophy of the time. "Wordsworth sees Cambridge as 'more of a hallucination than an actuality - as something corrupts man's mental innocence" ("Cousen in "The Epistemological Poem: Wordsworth's Prelude").

Like Rousseau (in *Emile*), he doesn't favour the formal education that exercises useless theorizing and cramming. Hence, he explicitly attacks the contemporary education system, modelling a child of his time as the product of the modern system, who involves himself in extensive book learning and likes the sort of knowledge of geology, politics, geography and navigation, etc. Wordsworth says, " he is a prodigy, in learning and books... Skilled in all branches of knowledge, boats, navigation"(Book Five in "*The Prelude*"). He sees his intellectual capacity as mere revulsion as he perpetuates his life in lies and corrupts his soul in conceit, following the path of vanity rather than wisdom.

In contrast, Wordsworth, like Rousseau, advocates natural education that is gained through experiences under a natural environment, instead of sitting inside and reading books. Clarke summarizes Wordsworth's concept of nature that Nature is an educational force that can not only supply man with knowledge but also contribute to his moral education (Nature's education of man: Remarks on the Philosophy of Wordsworth, 1948). Here, Wordsworth means by nature all natural objects, including lakes, mountains, roads, etc. He chooses the child as the primary subject in his theory of education. He thinks Childhood is "the fair seed time of the soul" when the general habits and desires form. He suggests that there could be no better companions for a child up to four or five years of age than the flowers, the grass, the cattle, the sheep, scamper away from him when he makes a vain in expecting chase after them, the pebbles upon the roads, etc. (Book one, *The Prelude*). He believes that a child learns morality when he responds to Nature, observes people's reactions and experiences nature through his senses as " Nature's self, and things that teach as Nature teaches" ("*The Prelude*", 1805). He argues that books can no teach as nature teaches. Nature purifies and sanctifies the child's mind when he interacts with it and feels the joy through his senses. It helps him in cognizing the truth that leads him to learning and better understanding in later life through the association of ideas (Hartley's Principle) and brings the creative faculty in the mind of the child. Hence, he favors natural education for the upbringing of children, critiquing the institutions' formal education. As Geoffrey Hartman the Wordsworth's argument, argues that, " nature's infinite resources mock the educators who treat children like engines, confining them by a timetable scheme of development and seeking to eliminate idleness and fruitful accidents ".

That's the reason, Wordsworth emphatically focuses on the Experiences of Nature that enhance the creative power through imagination in the individual, unlike indoor learning of formal education, where no chance of creation. As a result, he doesn't mention his learning at Hawkshead Grammar School and St. John's College, Cambridge, in fact, outside the classrooms, vacations, observing seasons, events, sunrise, morning and evening walks, etc. (in "*The Prelude*"). He regards the public roads as his Schools where he reads daily the 'passions of mankind' and the ' depth of human soul'.

Wordsworth believes Nature has a transforming power that transforms experiences into the creative imagination. "Nature provides a model for Wordsworth to formulate the concept of imagination as a creative power" (Heffernan in " Wordsworth Theory of Poetry: The Transforming Imagination"). He claims that this imagination helps him in comprehending the self and the world deeply, as it closes the gap between the man and the world that becomes responsible for his creation, that is, poetry. He writes poetry, experiencing Nature, exploring and moving to different places. For instance, *The Prelude* records, he starts writing a poem, " The Evening Walk", full of descriptions of the landscape, which he writes at Hawkshead during vacations, not at university. In 1790, he thinks himself able to collect

material for his poem, "Descriptive Sketches" (1793), when he goes on a trip with his Welsh friend Robert Jones, with the Alps as their goal.

Thus, Wordsworth values Natural Education rather than the contemporary formal Education as he argues experiences of Nature lead the man towards creative powers through imagination, critiquing the institutional Education that is based on reason, facts and lies that hinders the growth, hence no creation.

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