



Scan to know paper details and
author's profile

Exploring Nature's Reality: A Study through the Poetry of Wordsworth and Keats

Radha Ahluwalia & Dr. Shukla Chatterjee

ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of the representation of nature in the literary works of two Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and John Keats. The Romantic era of the 19th century was marked by a love for the natural world, which was depicted in the literature of the period. Through an analysis of the works of these two poets, this paper seeks to give a more comprehensive understanding of the reality of nature as depicted in their writings. The research reveals that while Wordsworth's works present a realistic nature, characterized by its femininity and beauty, Keats' works take a more scenic approach, capturing the essence of nature in its grandeur and physical beauty. Overall, this paper aims to contribute to the discussions surrounding the depiction of nature in Romantic literature.

Keywords: nature, reality, romantic literature, analysis, poetry, john keats, william wordsworth, imagination.

Classification: DDC Code: 200

Language: English



Great Britain
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 573358
Print ISSN: 2515-5786
Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 23 | Issue 23 | Compilation 1.0



Exploring Nature's Reality: A Study through the Poetry of Wordsworth and Keats

Radha Ahluwalia^a & Dr. Shukla Chatterjee^a

ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of the representation of nature in the literary works of two Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and John Keats. The Romantic era of the 19th century was marked by a love for the natural world, which was depicted in the literature of the period. Through an analysis of the works of these two poets, this paper seeks to give a more comprehensive understanding of the reality of nature as depicted in their writings. The research reveals that while Wordsworth's works present a realistic nature, characterized by its femininity and beauty, Keats' works take a more scenic approach, capturing the essence of nature in its grandeur and physical beauty. Overall, this paper aims to contribute to the discussions surrounding the depiction of nature in Romantic literature.

Keywords: nature, reality, romantic literature, analysis, poetry, john keats, william wordsworth, imagination.

I. INTRODUCTION

"The poetry of the earth is never dead." –John Keats

The natural world is as ubiquitous as humanity, spread far and wide on this Earth and inside every living being. Nature takes on many forms twisting, and turning, morphing into its different realities. Its manifestations are seen through art, speeches and poetry. Two poets of the 19th Century, William Wordsworth and John Keats, devoted their writing to the natural world exploring their different perspectives about Nature. This research paper aims to delve into their poetry to develop the hypothesis that Nature is real.

II. METHODOLOGY

Analyzing some selected works of Wordsworth and Keats, the research for this paper involves both Primary and Secondary reference. Journals and books on nature, Romanticism, and Poetry were reviewed and considered to support our primary research. This also helped in a better and more comprehensive understanding of the deeper meanings in the literary works which were examined. The primary research of this paper was focussed only on the literature written by William Wordsworth and John Keats. They were critically analyzed through their themes, symbols, metaphors and poetic devices leading to the main findings of this paper. The concepts in e our study are our understanding of their poetry after the research.

Content

2.1 Romanticism and the Vague Idea of Nature

Romanticism began around 1798 with political and social upsurge influenced by the French Revolution. It was characterised by the principles of the worship of nature, individualism and spirituality, a celebration of isolation and solitude, an interest in the common man, an idealization of women, and personification and pathetic fallacy.

2.2 Romanticism in Literature

'Romanticism in literature has as many definitions as it has poets however, none have provided clarity. This era by some was known as the era of ego, others the discovery of nature and it was further realized that others were shifting towards it as the return to medievalism. Such portrayals, broad in their complexity and generalization about their manifestation nevertheless are the truth. England in the

Romantic era was focused on developing and worshipping Nature while France with its French Revolution explored the uncharted territories of individualism and Germany into Medievalism.¹ This period spanned with them various literary luminaries like Byron, Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth.

2.3 Wordsworth as a Romantic Poet

William Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."² He believed that poetry was meant to be identified as "emotions recollected in tranquillity"² with the immediate act of composing a poem being unforced and away from societal conventions. Romantic poets placed passionate emphasis on poetic impulses. For Wordsworth, his wording and his literature was a device to represent Nature in all of its beauty. The feminine characteristics of a woman were also often placed as that of Nature in Wordsworth's words. He idealised women and felt he existed to describe nature and this can be seen in his works where he subordinates himself to nature as a mere worshipper of the spiritual entity. Wordsworth's works however lack the stylistic excess of unnecessary vocabulary and depict genuine rustic language untainted by "gaudiness"². His perspective of what he wanted to do was to show man communicating to man. Poets of the Neo-Classical and the Classical period can be seen having a viewpoint that they considered being above everyone else's which was shown by their characteristic need to show off their intelligence prowess through their flowery vocabulary. Wordsworth wanted to not only go away from this direction but also to portray himself as a poet who reigned nature at its throne. Wordsworth was considered to be the origin of the Romantic period in England.

2.4 Keats as a Romantic Poet

John Keats wrote that "if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not

come at all."³ Being a successor of Wordsworth at the start of the Romantic era, Keats's poetry was said to be greatly influenced by him.⁴ He believed that nature was a source of life, the core of the world and as proof of this, he used to write long summaries of natural existences. He however failed to realise the spiritual essence of nature in his poetry and through him romantic poetry evolved into something akin to letters one would send to a lover. Keats demonstrated nature as natural and honest, never betraying and never being able to lie. For him nature was a scenery he could escape to and even though he loved the environment he failed to incorporate that sense of worship on the same level as Wordsworth if he felt it. This is shown with the understanding of imagination, memory, reality and nature in their poems. Keats's poetry had a common characteristic pervading each of his works which was his style. It lay in the sensorial path where one can feel what he's experiencing. The writers and poets of the Romantic period were known for their general exaltation of emotion over reason and of sense over intellect. Keats was a true romantic poet.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED WORKS OF WORDSWORTH AND KEATS

Through the PREFACE of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's perspective on his poetry comes to light and through this work, one can understand his described poetic principles.

The Proto-Romantic poets that came before him, Cowper, Gray, Blake and Burns angered at merely copying classical subjects, slowly broke away from the traditional methods of writing about simple natural subjects in the common vernacular. Poetic language according to Wordsworth was devitalised and so was the thematic province of poetry, as neither evoked feelings any longer. The Romantics sought new ways of expressing themselves, further distancing themselves from

¹ References made to concept of Romanticism in "Romanticism" by Edwin Berry Burgum (1941)

² From William Wordsworth's Preface to his poetry collection "Literary Ballads" (1802)

³ From a letter John Keats wrote to John Taylor 'To John Taylor' (1818)

⁴ Understood in a Journal Article published by Clarence D. Thorpe 'Wordsworth and Keats-A Study in Personal and Critical Impression' (1927)

the absurd and the nonsensically abstract language. The Romantic era was entirely built upon the primordial relations between Nature and humanity. The writers and poets of this time were known for their prioritisation of emotion over reason and of sense over intellect.

Wordsworth considered Poetry to be “a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart”² He believed that language which developed through repeated sayings and rustic would be a more permanent alternative than, the extravagant vocabulary “substituted it by Poets”² who think that they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men “and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.”² Through this, we understand Wordsworth’s poetry as stated by him is said to have taken out the unnecessary and the extravagant from older poetic vocabulary substituting it with the language of the common person. “the language” of his poetry lines “does in no respect differ from that of prose”.²

The poem "Solitary Reaper" portrays a woman who is reaping the fields in solitude and singing a melancholic song. Although the poet doesn't understand the meaning of the song because he cannot communicate with her in the same language, it evokes deep emotional responses from him as a witness of such beauty.

Nature for Wordsworth would take on feminine qualities of maidens and dames which guided the poem ‘The Solitary Reaper’. The young woman in the literary work is symbolic of representing Nature and its emotional resonance. The poet cannot communicate with it in the same language but he understands the beauty and the spiritual, and emotional landscape it provides.

He emphasises nature's unrestrained impact on him in the first lines.

"Behold Her Single in the Field"⁵ shows nature as a solitary figure of worship separated in its form of true purity, "reaping and singing by herself"⁵. The resonance of nature's music and beauty for him "is overflowing with the sound"⁵ which is its quality to resonate with the poet.

Wordsworth further solidifies nature's isolation with the next lines. He states that "No nightingale did ever chaunt, More welcome notes to weary bands Of travellers in some shady haunt"⁵, emphasizing the natural world's refreshing qualities.

He states that a “Voice so thrilling ne'er was heard In springtime from the Cuckoo bird, Breaking the silence of the seas Among the farthest Hebrides”⁵.

The poet describes his inability to communicate with Nature as he tries to understand "what she sings"⁵ or what nature tries to tell him with its sounds and own language. By the end of the poem Wordsworth treats himself as a mere listener of "her song"² which "could have no ending"⁵. As he mounted up the hill The music in his heart he bore Long after it was heard no more.

Therefore it can be said that through this poem Wordsworth ascertains his belief that nature is a real entity for him. William Wordsworth's poetry is marked by his exploration into the themes of nature, imagination, memory and the human experience in his poetry.

In ‘Nutting’, Wordsworth beautifully illustrates the power of imagination, as he explores the natural world and allows himself to be swept away by its beauty. The speaker's journey through the woods is interwoven with the metaphor of gathering nuts, which represents how our relationships with others and our imagination shape our understanding of the world.

Memory is a major theme in this poem, as the speaker reflects on his childhood experience in the woods. Through the act of remembering, the speaker can gain a deeper understanding of his relationship with nature and how it has influenced his perception of the world. Wordsworth believed

⁵ From William Wordsworth’s poem “The Solitary Reaper” (1807)

that memories have a profound and lasting impact on our individual experiences and understanding of the world around us.

The famous poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by Wordsworth highlights the incredible ability of imagination to overcome moments of isolation and transform them into sources of inspiration. The poet reflects on a field of daffodils he once came across, which continues to provide solace and happiness during his solitary moments of loneliness. By showcasing the lasting impact of positive memories on our emotional well-being, the poem emphasizes the enduring power of joyful experiences bringing in Nature's ability to heal the remorse and solitude of human life.

Wordsworth's literary revolution fundamentally challenged the traditional aestheticism of the past, replacing it with a poetic voice that was characterized by a sense of passionate urgency and deep emotional engagement. Through his work, he established new and profound connections between humanity and the natural world, thus creating a new paradigm that would come to define the Romantic era.

Wordsworth's attitude towards Nature was not fixed, it was ever-changing and slowly developed to a point of plain worship.

In episodes of his childhood, Wordsworth derived animalistic pleasure from the natural landscapes. As shown in the poem 'Nutting' the poet recounts an episode of him as a young boy going to explore and in a way 'conquer' the natural world around him. It describes the transitioning of his perspective toward the spiritual sense of nature. He employs an important allegory to describe nature as being raped through his unconsented exploration. He uses phrases such as "frugal Dame"⁶, "a virgin scene"⁶, "voluptuous"⁶, and "eyed a banquet"⁶ to depict nature's femininity calling out to him and as a man is attracted to a woman, "the heart luxuriates with indifferent things wasting its kindness on stocks and stones and vacant air"⁶ he feels attracted to nature. Thus the destruction he said to have come by his inherent humanity began. "Then up I rose, And

dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash and merciless ravage"⁶ displays his primal need to destroy nature because of its beauty. He felt later regret and a sense of pain seeing nature as a "spirit in the woods"⁶ which held "gentleness of heart"⁶ and thus his views of the natural world transformed into a need to worship.

While Wordsworth grew older he was drawn more towards the grander aspects of Nature.

"I too exclusively esteemed that love,
And sought that beauty, which, as Milton sings,
Hath terror in it. Thou didst soften down
This over-sternness; but for thee, dear Friend!
My soul, too reckless of mild grace, had stood
In her original self too confident,
Retained too long a countenance severe;
A rock with torrents roaring, with the clouds
Familiar, and a favourite of the stars:
But thou didst plant its crevices with flowers,
Hang it with shrubs that twinkle in the breeze,
And teach the little birds to build their nests
And warble in its chambers."

He slowly softened towards nature with the influence of his sister Dorothy.

Dear Sister! was a kind of gentler spring
That went before my steps. Thereafter came
One whom with thee friendship had early paired;
She came, no more a phantom to adorn
A moment, but an inmate of the heart,
And yet a spirit, there for me enshrined
To penetrate the lofty and the low;"⁷

Wordsworth not only saw the natural world as a vital formative influence on man, he believed that the world was a living symbol living in its own right.

With age and time, he further softened his outlook towards nature and Wordsworth formed a spiritual bond with it.

Even with this evolution of how he treated nature, Wordsworth kept an identity of nature constant as a living entity. This is the most prominent in his

⁶ From Wordsworth's poem "The Nutting" (1800)

⁷ From Wordsworth's Prelude: Book Fourteenth (1850)

work "I travelled among unknown men"⁸ where he describes, Lucy the figure of his love as the nature surrounding pointing towards a conclusion that humanity exists as a form of nature and nature exists everywhere. "Among thy mountains did I feel, The joy of my desire; And she I cherished turned her wheel, Besides an English fire Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed, The bowers where Lucy played, And thine too is the last green field That Lucy's eyes surveyed."⁸ Therefore for Wordsworth nature was a living entity.

John Keats was a poet who followed the principle of "Art for art's sake"⁹. His works appeal to the reader's love for aesthetics and beauty, as they evoke the senses with imagery, personification, metaphors, and alliteration. If Keats were an orchestra conductor, his writing would be like music that guides the imagination. He believed that truth and beauty coexist, and his imagination was his guiding force.

Keats believed that beauty was direct which is shown through the aestheticism of his works.

"On the sea" is a reflection of the eternal and powerful nature of the sea. Keats describes its constant presence and its timeless quality through the rich descriptions characteristic of his poetry.

The poem begins by emphasizing the endless and never-ending nature of the sea's whisperings: "It keeps eternal whisperings around Desolate shores"¹⁰. The Sea is further depicted as an overwhelming presence with "its mighty swell"¹⁰ and "gluts twice ten thousand caverns"¹⁰ adding on to its immortal activity. Keats appreciated the sea's "gentle temper"¹⁰ which "scarcely"¹⁰ moves the "smallest shell from whence it sometimes fell"¹⁰. Keats further praises the "wideness of the sea"¹⁰ where one's whose "ears are dinned with the uproar"¹⁰ of daily life or one who has overindulged in "cloying melodies"¹⁰ can lose themselves in thoughts until consciousness returns to them as if they heard the song of "sea nymphs"¹⁰.

⁸ From Wordsworth's poem "I travelled among unknown men" published in 'Poems' (1807)

⁹ a slogan of the literary movement Aestheticism developed in the Decadent period

¹⁰ From Keat's poetry "On The Sea" (1817)

This delves into the reality of Keat's nature which he escapes to through his idealisation of nature as a beautiful truth where he can lose himself.

The themes and ideas evident in Keats's great odes are typical of the Romanticism after Wordsworth. Following the poet, Keat's works followed the principles of the beauty of nature, the relationship between creativity and passion, the response to beauty and suffering, and the transience of human life.

Nature for him had human-like qualities but it was distinctly described as a place rather than a physical entity. The beauty in nature according to Keats was scenic, where he could escape to and lacked the love and worship which Wordsworth gave it. Keats presented Nature as natural and honest in a way that it never lied and through his works he never went beyond the aesthetics.

Imagination was a major theme in Keat's writing. According to him "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found its truth"¹¹. Keats believes the imagination, which fuels creative expression, to be the most direct access to truth.

Ode To A Nightingale is a poem that describes the poet's appreciation for a nightingale's song. It depicts the song becoming his escape from the harsh realities of life. It explores the poet's deepest desires to join into the bird's timeless world, free from mortality. Keats is shown as grappling finding joy in art and this conflict is displayed through his artistic expression.

The nightingale in this poem is a symbol of imagination and art and the song symbolizes his escape from realities. It explores the idea of momentarily hiding from the troubles of the real world.

The nightingale's song while beautiful is still fleeting like the pleasures of life.

Keats skillfully correlates the poet's experience of his imagination and the reality of ephemeral beauty which is not always apparent.

¹¹ From a letter John Keats wrote to Benjamin Bailey called "The Authenticity of The Imagination" (1817)

La Belle Dame Sans Merci is a ballad which narrates a knight's experience encountering a mysterious enchanting woman. The Knight captivated by her beauty falls under her spell which leads to him experiencing a moment of fairy-like passion with her. It follows the knight's realisation of the deceptive allure of romantic fantasies which would lead to tragic consequences.

This poem symbolises the romantic fascination with mystery and the supernatural, and it is said that it follows Keats's unsettling love life and childhood due to which he felt as if imagination was his only solace after reality gave up on him.

IV. CONCLUSION

Nature takes on various forms in the minds and hearts of different individuals. In exploring the works of Wordsworth, one can gather insight into his perspective, which portrays nature as both a physical and spiritual entity that he held in reverence.

Wordsworth experienced Nature to be real through the mortal mundane life and discovered the beauty and immortality of Nature. He realised through his 'spontaneous overflow of emotions' how when connected with Nature, Nature has the ability to provide solace to all mortal problems. It is a medium to transfer the mortals to a world of Beauty and give the experience of the immortal. Meanwhile, Keats, a successor of Wordsworth, viewed Nature as a means of escape rather than a tangible presence. By showcasing the diverse facets of the natural world's reality, both poets affirm that Nature is indeed real.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Burgum, Edwin Berry. "Romanticism." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1941, pp. 479–90. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4332291>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2023.
2. <http://bartleby.com> The Harvard Classics 1909-14 Preface to Lyrical Ballads William Wordsworth 1800.
3. "To John Taylor – 27 Feb 1818 – the Keats Letters Project." *The Keats Letters Project*, 27

Feb. 2018, keatslettersproject.com/category/correspondence/to-john-taylor-27-feb-1818.

4. Thorpe, Clarence D. "Wordsworth and Keats—A Study in Personal and Critical Impression." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 42, no. 4, Modern Language Association (MLA), Dec. 1927, pp. 1010–26. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/457549>.
5. Wordsworth, William. *Poems of William Wordsworth*. 1805 'Solitary Reaper'.
6. Woodhead, Chris. *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Verse*. 1984. (pp. 20- 39): 'The Nutting'.
7. Wordsworth, William. *Prelude*. England, 1850.
8. Woodhead, Chris. *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Verse*. 1984. 'Lucy Poems'.
9. "Art For Art's Sake | Creative Expression, Aestheticism and Criticism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 May 1999, www.britannica.com/topic/art-for-arts-sake.
10. Woodhead, Chris. *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Verse*. 1984 'On The Sea'.
11. *To Benjamin Bailey | British Literature Wiki*. sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/to-benjamin-bailey.