

Wordsworth and the Artificial Lights

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Abstract: *In The Prelude, Wordsworth's experiences at Cambridge, and London are important because the time he spent in those places played an essential part in developing his intellectual, social and political beliefs. This research article will study the impact of Cambridge and London life on Wordsworth .*

Key Words: Cambridge, Students, London, Nature.

I. Introduction

Sunil Sarker in his book **Wordsworth** states that when Wordsworth entered Cambridge University he was 'elated, proud and happy, and felt to be a man of business.' (Sarker, 2001:495) **1**. In Book 3 of **The Prelude** Wordsworth says:

**My spirit was up, my thoughts were full of hope;
Some friends I had, acquaintances who there
Seemed friends, poor simple school-boys, now hung around
With honour and importance; in a world
Of welcome faces up and down I roved;
Questions, directions, counsel and advice
Flow'd in upon me from all sides, fresh day
Of pride and pleasure! To myself I seem'd
A man of business and expense..... (18-26)**

But some critics believe that the environment of Cambridge conflicted with Wordsworth's idea of life. He says 'I was not for that hour/ Nor for that place'. He shares with De Quincey that 'the manner of the young men were very frantic and issolute...' (Selincourt, 1959:1X1V) **2**

Cambridge was a small and congested town and as Pryme says, 'on bad days it was all mud and flowing gutters,.... every night the streets nearest the university were filled with drunken roistering students, making passage dangerous.' (Pryme, 1870:44) **3** The streets were very dark at night because illuminations were reserved for special occasions only. Academic work was not important for most of the Cambridge students. They were more interested in parties and shows. According to Johnston-

**Students met, boasted, argued, and quarreled in the taverns with each other
or with the town 'snobs'....between the students and the town boys, the
fights were very frequent and very violent...These 'disgraceful tumults' broke
out everywhere...the most frequent cause of the street fights, and the
most frequent topic at the drinking parties which preceded them, was
women... Prostitutes were very common in Cambridge as nightly drinking,
and presented an attractive threat to the college boys (Johnston, 1998:126-127-129) **4****

Cambridge divided the students in three categories: nobles, pensioners, and sizars. Wordsworth was given the rank of sizar because he was dependent on his guardians. This category was the lowest category. Sizars were not respected -their food was made up from the leftover of the high tables. In **The Prelude**, Wordsworth imagines sizars to be standing on the last skirts of their specified zone as if they longed to enter the student's space but were forbidden to do so by their lower rank. Cambridge led Wordsworth into an artificial world. He had to dress up as good as any of his classmates. In Book 3 Wordsworth says:

**..... I had made a change
In climate; and my nature's outward coat**

**Changed also, slowly and insensibly.
To the deep quiet and majestic thoughts
Of loneliness succeeded empty noise
And superficial pastimes;... (209-214)**

Wordsworth tried hard to reconcile with the mood of the institution but neither the university nor the manners of the student life suited his idea of humanity, rather it instilled in his mind a vain disregard for common man.

**Call back, O Friend! A moment to thy mind,
The place itself and fashion of the rites.
Up-shouldering in a dislocated lump
With shallow ostentatious carelessness,
My Surplice, gloried in, and yet despised,
I clove in pride through the inferior throng
Of the plain Burghers, who in audience stood
On the last skirts of their permitted ground,
Beneath the pealing Organ. Empty thoughts!
I am ashamed of that great Bard,
And thou, O Friend! who in thy ample mind
Hast station'd me for reverence and love,
Ye will forgive the weakness of that hour
In some of its unworthy vanities,
Brother of many more. (3,312-326)**

In Cambridge Wordsworth was introduced to the darker side of life. He realized the fact that society has parted man from man by outside marks and has neglected 'the universal heart.' (12.218) Wordsworth tried hard not to lose sight of his belief in human dignity. Pinion says:

**He knew 'how books' 'debase the many' for the sake of
'the wealthy few,' who see by 'artificial lights, and how they
set forth 'extrinsic differences and neglect the universal heart.
Wordsworth resolves to make his subject men as they are within
Themselves. (Pinion,1984:150)5**

Wordsworth started avoiding social activities of Cambridge. He felt he had a vocation other than academic work. He says:

**Oft did I leave
My Comrades, and the Crowd, Buildings and Groves,
And walked along the fields, the level fields, (91-93)
Unlike the 'loyal students faithful to their books,' who aspired academic glories, Wordsworth would
wander across the fields and searched for universal things.
My powers and habits: let me dare to speak (98)
A higher language, say that now I felt
The strength and consolation which were mine.
As if awaken'd, summon'd, rous'd, constrain'd,
I looked for universal things; pursued
The common countenance of earth and heaven; (110)**

As Selincourt says, 'there could hardly be stronger testimony to the soundness of his early education and the strength of his character than that he could pass unscratched through the Cambridge of his day.'(Selincourt,ixiv)6 He lived in his own world, '...yet I was most rich-/I had a world about me-'twas my own;/I made it, for it only lived to me,/And to the God who sees into the heart.'(143-146)

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth grieves at man's ineffectual hard work for 'trifling recognition.' He emphasizes the fact that man works hard to enjoy the eternal life but he foolishly adopts wrong means for the purpose. He criticizes the dry academic pursuits which are of no real worth for humanity on contrary they are the cause of man's sadness. Wordsworth states that unhealthy approach to life can be altered through fruitful instruction. Here Wordsworth can be compared to modern thinkers such as Dr Aleris Carrel who also is of the view that '..... despite the immense sum spent on education, we have failed to develop completely their intellectual

and moral activities....The happiest and most useful men consist of a well integrated whole of intellectual, moral, and organic activities ...It is only with such thoroughly developed individuals that a real civilization can be constructed.”(Carrel,137)⁷ Hazrat Ali (PBUH) said to his son, ‘A young heart is like virgin soil which accepts whatever kind of seed is sown in it. My son, I took opportunity offered by your childhood years for training you, before that your impressionable heart should become hardened and before that different things occupy your mind.’(Cited in Lari,1997:33)⁸ Wordsworth’s ideal education sought:

...to guide the fluctuating youth
Firm in the sacred paths of moral truth,
To regulate the mind’s disordered frame;
The glimmering fires of Virtue to enlarge,
And purge from Vice’s dross my tender charge.
(Lines written as a school exercise at Hawkshed,1951:483)

In **The Prelude** Wordsworth feels glad that he was not reared in the artificial environment of urban life because it was not suitable for the mental and physical growth and development of a child. He emphasizes that children should grow in simplicity, truth, knowledge, and imagination, which he thought is innate in man and guides him to most of the virtues and assist him in seeking perfection which forms his moral behaviour, and also passion, which he accepted ‘the supreme guide of life...the superior reason.’(Sarker,2001:510)⁹ In **The Prelude** he says:

Simplicity in habit, truth in speech,
Be these the daily strengthens of their mind;
May books and Nature be their daily joy!
And knowledge, rightly honoured with that name-
Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power! (V.421-25)

In Book 3 of **The Prelude** Wordsworth expresses his concern about the dry method of academic pursuits. He considers the scholars of his time as ‘honest dunes’ for running after worldly advancements which are of no real value in life. He says:

Far more I griev’d to see among the Band
Of those who in the field of contest stood
As combatants, passions that did to me
Seem low and mean;... (501-505)

Similarly In Book 5 of **The Prelude** Wordsworth says:

.....O Man,
Earth’s paramount Creature! and thy race, while ye
Shall sojourn on this planet; not for woes
Which thou edur’st; that weight, albeit huge,
.....but for those palms achiev’d,
Through length of time, by study and hard thought, (3-10)
and yet Man (24)
As long as he shall be the Child of Earth,
Might almost ‘weep to have’ what he may lose,
Nor be himself extinguish’d; but survive
Abject, depress’d, forlorn, disconsolate. (28)

Wordsworth got his degree from Cambridge, and left for London. Initially, he thought that London was a place out of real world:

Marvellous things
My fancy had shap’d forth, of sights and shows,
Processions, Equipages, Lords and Dukes,
The Kings, and the King’s palace, and not last
Or least, heaven bless him! The renow’d Lord Mayor:
Dreams hardly less intense than those which wrought
A change of purpose in young Whittington, (102-113)

Wordsworth lived in the City of London for four months and witnessed the impact of the Industrial Revolution on English society. In **The Prelude** he describes London as a corrupt city dominated by the law of profit and gain. In his poem **London**, Wordsworth depicts English society as a 'fen of stagnant waters' and its people as selfish men. In **The Prelude**, he sees majority of the respectable leaders as hypocrites living an artificial life. Wordsworth considers them entertainers:

**Pass we from entertainments that are such
Professedly to others titled higher,
Yet in the estimate of youth at least,
More near akin to these than names imply,
I mean the brawls of Lawyers in their Courts
Before the ermined Judge, or that great Stage
Where Senartors, tongue-favor'd Men, perform,
Admir'd and envied.... (-486 - 493)**

Wordsworth portrays the corruptions of the Church and says:

.. ..and where but in the holy Church?
**There have I seen a comely Bachelor,
Fresh from a toilette of two hours, ascend
The Pulpit, serapic glance look up,
And in a tone elaborately low
Beginning, lead his voice through many a maze,
A minuet course, and winding up his mouth,
From time to time into an orifice
Most delicate, a lurking eyelet, small
And only not visible, again
Open it out, diffusing thence a smile
Of rapt irradiation exquisite. (513-560)**

Sarker observes that for Wordsworth the '**most painful and shattering experience in London was that people did not feel the necessity of communicating among themselves, and each one of them lived in a sort of cocoon created by himself.**'(Sarker, 2003:521)¹⁰ The next door neighbours were like strangers to each other. In Book 7 Wordsworth says:

.....Above all, one thought
**Baffled my understanding, how men lived
Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
Strangers, and knowing not each other's names. (115-118)**
In Book 12 Wordsworth says:
**Love cannot be ;nor does it thrive with ease
Among the close and over crowded haunts
Of cities, where human heart is sick,
And the eye feeds it not, and cannot feed.(202-205)**

Wordsworth saw that London society was disintegrated and people were defined by their superficial distinctions. Wordsworth saw and noted '**all specimens of man, and studied men of diverse personages and characters, of many nations**'. (Sarker,2001:518)¹¹ Wordsworth says:

**Among the crowd, conspicuous less or more,
As we proceed, all specimens of Man
Through all the colours which the sun bestows,
And every chasracter of form and face,
The Swede,the Russian; from the genial South,
The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote
America,the Hunter- Indian; Moors,
Malays, Lascars, the Tartar and Chinese,
And Negro Ladies in white muslin gowns. (221-228)**

In London there was poverty and degradation. People earned their living by means of shows, quackeries, or prostitution. Once while Wordsworth and his friend Nicholson were returning home, they saw a prostitute. According to Johnston, **'...that every tenth woman Wordsworth saw was likely to be a prostitute.....'**(Johnston,1998:224)¹² Wordsworth feels pity for the woman and blames society for her condition.

Due to the Industrial Revolution, population increased in the City. In Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth says- **'the increasing accumulation of men in cities have blunt the discriminating powers of mind and reduced it to the stage of savage topor'**(Cited inOwen,1974:73)¹³ In **The Prelude** Wordsworth says:

**Oh, blank confusion! and a type not false
Of what the mighty City is itself
To all except a Straggler here and there,
To the whole Swarm of its inhabitants;
An undistinguishable world to men,
The slaves un respited of low pursuits,
Lying amid the same perpectual flow
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity,... (721-727)**

According to Michael, **'When Wordsworth was born, approximately 25% of the population lived in cities; by the time he died, this had doubled, and the population overall almost-tripled in the course of the 18th century.'**(Flinn.Michael, **British Population Growth, 1700-1850,London:Macmillan,1790**)¹⁴ But inspite of that Londoners lived a lonely life. The rush and the roar of city life lessened the possibility of social relationing. They lived a life of fiction and wanted an escape from the realities of life. According to Blank, **' The urban living conditions and uniformity of occupation constitutes the condition for the demise of high culture and loss of discriminating powers in a society that seeks escapism in a craving for sensational entertainment.'**(Blank, **The Journal of Popular Culture.Vol 39.No3,2006,Blackwell Publishing, Inc: P.365**)¹⁵

Life in London saddened Wordsworth. It had become chaotic with no respect for tradition and moral values. When Wordsworth's poems were criticized by Londoners he said, **'..they are altogether incompetent judges. These people in the senseless hurry of their idle lives do not read books, they mere snatch a glance at them that they may talk about them...for this multitude of unhappy, and misguided,and misguiding beings, an entire regeneration must be produced;....'**(Cited in Owen,1974:115)¹⁶ In such an a society when Wordsworth sees a beggar he laments at the condition of Man and says:

**Amid the moving pagent, 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind Beggar,.....
..., upon his Chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the Man, and who he was.
My mind did at this spectacle turn round
To me that in this Lable was a type,
Or emblem,of the utmost that we know,
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And,on the shape of the unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I look'd
As if admonish'd from another world. (637-649)**

Wordsworth thought that in urban crowd humanity is consumed by trivial objects. Watson says that Wordsworth's **'.....experience of London gave him an insight into these problems, and a life long attachment to the value which the mass society denied: individuality, local loyalty, the spirit of community.'**(Watson,1992:166)¹⁷

Wordsworth poetry is a campaign against the destruction of mankind by material and social pressures. He refused to walk with the crowd and lose himself in it.

**The slaves unrespited of low persuits, (724)
Living amid the same perpetual flow
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences**

**That have no law, no meaning, and no end;
Oppression under which even highest minds
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free;**

Wordsworth bids farewell to the city of bondage. Wordsworth says:

**A farewell to the City left behind,
.....
I journey'd towards the Vale that I had chosen. (98-100)**

Being brought up in an intimate and a free society of Cockermonth, the poet prefers a society which is 'less under restraint....less under the influence of social vanity' (Owen,1974:71)18 In Book XI he says:

**For, born in a poor District, and which yet
Retaineth more of ancient homeliness,
Manners erect, and frank simplicity,
Than any other nook of English Land. (215-218)**

Wordsworth thought that all human beings are dignified; whether rich or poor because they are essentially the same. His ideal man is a free man - free from all mean pulls of the earth, 'Man free, man working for himself, with choice/ Of time, and place, and object;'(104-105) Wordsworth's love of freedom is reflected in the beginning of *The Prelude*. The poet expresses his joy when he is released from city confines:

**OH there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky: it beats against my cheek,
And seems half conscious of the joy it gives.
O welcome Messenger! O welcome Friend!
A captive greets thee, coming from a house
Of bondage, from your City walls set free,
A prison where he hath been long immured.
Now I am free, enfranchis'd and at large,
May fix my habitation where I will. (1-10)**

The poet is set free by the breeze to transcend all worldly. Wordsworth understands that although

**.....the picture weary out the eye,
By nature an unmanageable sight,
It is not wholly so to him who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things
An under sense of greatest; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole. (733-736)**

Wordsworth was of the view that physical and mental bondages are hideous for man. Wordsworth intended to raise the dignity of human life by stripping it of its pretensions. For younger Wordsworth real freedom meant free vent of emotions and access to open air. But for maturer Wordsworth, real freedom was 'freedom from the darkness that dwells within.' (Chauhan,1981:18)19

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