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Women in the Life and Works of William Wordsworth

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Abstract
William Wordsworth's life and his works are bound together that it is impossible to speak of the one without reference to the other. The role and impact of women in his life which has reflected in the lines in his poems is what is the focus laid. 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, Mary Hutchinson, later Mary Wordsworth, and Dorothy Wordsworth.
The purpose of this paper is to analyse the contribution and impact of women in the life and works of the great nature poet, William Wordsworth.

Keywords: Women, Wordsworth's Poems, Life, Works

Introduction

"Our business is with their books-to understand and to enjoy them," said Wordsworth 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 is 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 is impossible to speak of the one without reference to the other. They are commentaries on each other, and have, therefore, to be studied together. Throughout his life as an adult, Wordsworth was dependent heavily on the company and affection of women. He longed for their helpful and reassuring presence. Though he was felling inspired and productive he was invariably accompanied by one or more women who ensured that his life was as pleasant and comfortable as possible. As a young Wordsworth, his adolescence and university years were spent in an all-male environment. Annete 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.(*William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon* 221) 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. (*The Prelude IV* 339-40)

His "intellectual passions," as De Quincey has pointed out, were based on preternatural animal sensibility, diffused through all the animal passions (or appetites)." (*De Quincey: Collected Writings* 246) It is not surprising that when such a young man meets an effusive, exuberant and generous-hearted young woman like Annette, four and a half years his senior, there should spring up an exalting, blinding love for each other. 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."(Qtd. in Menon 101)

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 that natural children were considered quite natural and that even respectable people could speak of them naturally is seen from the ingenuousness with which the virtuous Dorothy at the age of twenty-three speaks of an illegitimate daughter of her cousin being sent to her and her brother to be educated. (Qtd by Harper in his *Life of William Wordsworth* 275) Within a few days after the birth of his child Wordsworth confided everything spoke to her uncle. But the result was not favourable. Annette carried on a copies correspondence with Wordsworth urging him to return and marry her, not for her sake, but for that of Caroline. The intervention of the war not only stopped the correspondence but rendered a journey from England to France one of utmost peril. His next meeting with Annette and Caroline took place only in August 1802. Much had happened in the ling 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 (not with that reckless abandon which characterises first love) to Mary Hutchinson to whom he had become betrothed before he left for France. The four weeks' stay with Annette and Caroline was marked by 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 years old, monarchist, town-bred, French, Annette must herself nave realized that a marriage was impossible between her and a grand republican, the priest of Nature's inner shrine,(*Hartely Coleridge's description of Wordsworth*)and a dedicated spirit,*(The Prelude IV 337)* the English father of her child. The whole story ended without ill-feeling, with a certain sweetness veiled by a shadow of sadness.

The episode of Annette, therefore, should not be considered merely as a great poet's youthful irregularity which had better be allowed to remain in oblivion. It provided the poet with the subject matter for several of his poems in which he represents a forsaken wife or an unmarried mother, and it gave him sympathetic insight into the heart of the fond mother and the loving wife or mistress.

Form 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 authorised version of the poem (1850) he refers to her as "the maid to whom were breathed my first love. The publication in 1940, for the first time, of some of Wordsworth's juvenalis in the volume of his early poems edited by E.de Selincourt has confirmed this conjecture. In Bearty 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 beauteous 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." In A Ballad written on March 23 and 24, 1787, 'Mary' is represented as pining to an early grave on account of her love for 'William'.

With this "loved one at his side"(*The Prelude XII* 262) and also his sister, he again visited Border Beacon near Penrith and toured among "romantic Dovedale's spiry rocks"(*The Prelude VI* 193) in 1790. Later she suffered an eclipse in Wordsworth's heart which was lighted by the new luminary, Annette. But by 1794, Mary reappeared on the scene and in Wordsworth's mind. In Septimi Gades, Wordsworth invites Mary to join him, if not in some valley on the Rhone, then at Grasmere. It undoubtedly suggests that his passion for Annette had already cooled. In 1797 at the invitation of the poet's guardian angel, Dorothy, she spent the spring with them at Racedown. During this stay the poet did not see much of her. On his return from Germany he visited her at the Yorkshire farm where she lived and she in turn spent the winter of 1801-2 at Dove Cottage at Grasmere, where the poet and his sister were then residing. Already in 1800 he had written a poem which could only be interpreted as a definite declaration of love. He had found a delightful secluded spot sheltered from the sun and wind:

It is beautiful;

> And if a man should plant his cottage near,
> Should sleep beneath the shelter of his trees,
> And blend its waters with his daily meal,
> He would so love it, that in his death hour
> Its image would survive among his thoughts;
> And therefore, my sweet Mary, this still Nook,
> With all its beeches, we have named from you. (*Wordsworth E.M.L 56*)

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 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 October 4, 1802. The marriage, says Myers, (*Wordsworth E.M.L 72)* "was the crowning stroke of Wordsworth's felicity-the poetic recompense for his steady advocacy of all simple and noble things." She was the "chicest boon" wit 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. (Qtd. in Menon 107)

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, "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):

> Thereafter came
> One whom with the friendship had early gained;
> 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;
> Even as one essence of pervading light
> Shines, in the brightest of ten thousand stars,
> And, the meek worm that feeds her lonely lamp
> Couched in the dewy grass.*(* Qtd. in Menon 107*)*

We now turn to the poet's sister, Dorothy Wordsworth. (*A life and study of Dorothy Wordsworth* 67) From the days of their infancy when they in "childish play" "together chased the butterfly,"(*Wordsworth : To a Butterfly* 11-13) the brother and the sister were deeply attached to each other. William loved her with a "violence of affection*," (Dorothy's Letter to Miss Jane Pollard Feb.16,1793)* 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 touchy of spiritual passion *:"("Garrod: Wordsworth's Lucy" , The Profession of Poetry)*

> And She who dwells with me, whom I have loved
> With such communion that no place on earth
> Can ever be a solitude to me.(*Poems on the Naming of Places* iii)

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 sweet-heart or husband with a deeper or tenderer love. "He felt towards her a something more than a brother and less than a lover, while she who had so little opportunity of giving her heart to another with that eager self-forgetfulness, which was the lovely necessity of her nature, could hardly have offered a lover more than she offered him."("Hugh I Anson Fausset", The *Lost Leader 89)* Dorothy was less than two years junior to William. From 1783 to 1793 she could see very little of her dear brother. His brief visits were pleasures which she re-lived in her imagination. On these occasions, when she went out on walks with him, supported on his arm, even the keenest north wind did not make her cold.(*Letter to Miss Pollard*). In 1794 she spent some time gipsying joyously with her brother, and after 1795 when they set up house at Racedown, they were never parted for more than a few weeks at a time until Wordsworth's death. During the years 1797-98 brother and sister were in "the seventh heaven creative rapture."(*Catherine Macdonald Maclean, Dorothy and Wordsworth)* The austerities of her youth led to a break-down in 1820 and she never again fully6 recovered her health. There is something unbearably sad about the last twenty-six years

of her life during which her broken spirit lingered in her broken body. She died in 1855, surviving her brother by five years.

"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, Lamp, 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. At a time when on account of the rude shocks he received from the events in France Wordsworth lost faith in Nature, in Art, and in his sympathetic sister that mainly restored him to his true self and preserved him for poetry:

..... the beloved sister in whose sight
Those days were passed.....
Maintained for me a saving intercourse
.....
She in the midst of all, preserved me still
A poet, made me seek beneath that name,
And that alone my office upon earth.*(The Prelude Xi 335-346)*

Wordsworth has fully and repeatedly acknowledged his dept to her, and Dorothy looms into heroic dimensions in his poetry:

Mine eyes did ne'er
Fix on a lovely object nor my mind
Take pleasure in the midst of happy thoughts,
But either she whom now I have, who now
Divides with me this loved abode, was there,
Or not far off. Where'er my footsteps turned
Her voice was like a hidden Bird that sang,
The thought of her was like a flash of light
Or an unseen companionship, a breath,
Of fragrance independent of the wind.*(The Recluse 84-93)*

Equally well-known are his lines:

She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
And humble cares, and delicate fears;
A heart the fountain of sweet tears;
And love and thought and joy!*(The Sparrow's Nest 17-20)*

The passages in which he refers to his companionship with her and his dept. to her are too numerous for enumeration; they are among the most deeply moving in all his poetry.

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 things my love had been" (1802) and Louisa (1805).[3] 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 Cumbrian Valley’s peace.”

Myself (Nature) will to my darling be
Both law and impulse; and with me
The girl in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.
She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn,
Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.
The floating clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the storm
Grace that shall mould the maiden’s form
By silent sympathy.
The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.
And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to stately height,
Her virgin bosom swell;
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy dell. (*Myers 124*)

The work is done. 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 affection not unlike the warmer feeling of a liver 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 poet when he first came among the hills near Tintern Abbey:

Like a roe

I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lovely streams,
Wherever nature led .....
..... the sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite .....*(Tintern Abbey 67-80)*

Addressing Dorothy herself, he says:

Let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee .....
.....thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies*(Tintern Abbey 67-80)*

She was, again, like Lucy, because she had been

Among all lovely things .....
Had noted well the stars, all the flowers that grew.

If Lucy springs up the mountain like a fawn, Dorothy is "fleet and strong" and "nymph-like,"

And down the rocks can leap along
Like rivulets in May.*(The Prelude XII 167-171)*

Again, is not Dorothy, as she is described in these lines, like Lucy:

Her very presence such a sweetness breathed,
That flowers and trees and even the silent hills,
And everything she looked on, should have had
An intimation how she bore herself
Towards them and to all creatures?

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

The Solitary Reaper is another of Wordsworth's unforgettable maidens. Her plaintive numbers, perhaps,

For old unhappy, far-off things
And battles ling ago

Overflow our hearts as well as the "vale profound," and the music of her "thrilling voice" lingers in our mental ears "long after it is heard no more." No less charming is Lucy Gray,

The sweetest thing that ever grew

Beside a human door.

We associate her with "the fawn at play, and the hare upon the green," and in spite of the tragedy of her untimely death, to us, as to the rustics of her village, "she is a living child;" we may meet her any day "upon the lonesome wild" singing "a solitary song that whistles in the wind." No less alive is the eight-year-old, curly-haired, bright-eyed cottage girl of We are seven, who "feels its life in every limb" and knows nothing of death.

Wordsworth's pictures of innocent girlhood, set in the background of nature, remind us of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*. She is truly a child of nature. Clothed in the bark dress which is too tight for her budding charms, and roving freely in the forest around *Kanva's* hermitage, she is, as she calls herself, a real sister to the trees. The mango tree with its branches moving in the wind like fingers seems to beckon to her to speak with her, and as she stands near the tree, she looks like a vine clinging to it. The spring creeper that blossoms ere its time is also her sister and a symbol of her coming happiness. "Kalidasa has let his hermitage-bred youthful heroine, says Tagore, follow the unsuspecting path of Nature, and nowhere has he restrained her..... At the beginning we see her self-forgetful and obedient to Nature's impulses like the plants and flowers."(*Sakuntala,* Act I) Like the deer in the hermitage she knows not fear. She does not distrust the sentiment of love or the character of the lover, and she gives herself up to the outburst of passion in the *gandharva* marriage which has all the wildness of nature. But despite her fall her innate chastity is unimpaired. "Like the mountain spring she stands forth pure in spite of mud."

It has often been pointed out that Wordsworth avoided the passion of love. The sonnet was through the ages a trumpet whence love-lorn poets blew their soul-animating strains. But although Wordsworth wrote more than five hundred sonnets, only one of them is devoted to theme of love, *Why art thou silent! Is thy love a plant.* Even this solitary exception "was written without the least reference to individual object," but merely to prove, the poet assures us, "that I could, if I thought fit, write in a strain that poets have been fond of." In Ruth he dwells, not upon the rapture of love, but upon the suffering of one of its victims. It is not however true to say that Wordsworth wholly avoided the subject, or failed when he touched it. "The Lucy poems are not poems of passion, in the usual sense, but they are love poems."*(A.C. Bradley, Wordsworssth : Oxford Lectures Meaning)* His early poems on Mary are undoubtedly poems of passion and of love.

It is no doubt true that he gave no remarkable importance to the passion of love. The reason for this is not that he, like Francis Bacon, and unlike Bacon's greater contemporary, considered love to be a weak passion. On the contrary, he is reported to have said that has he been a writer of love-poetry it would have been natural to him to write it with a degree of warmth which could hardly have been approved by his principles and which might have been undesirable for the reader. "He held it to be too strong and disorderly, too little intellectual in its quickening power, to be trusted as an illuminant."*(Raleigh: Wordsworth).* This is the lesson that Protesilaus teaches Laodamia:

Be taught, O faithful consort, to control
Rebellious passion: for the Gods approve
The depth, and not the tumult, of the soul:
A fervent, not ungovernable love. (*The Prelude XIV 168-231*)

The ideal that Protesilaus enforces is "love considered not as a revolution, not a consummation; as a self-abandonment not to a laxer, but to a sterner moral law; no longer as an invasive passion but as deliberate habit of the soul."*(Myers: Wordsworth E.M.L)* A passion that was likely to overwhelm the minds of men and women, to weaken their self-control and upset their mental balance, was one to be dreaded and shunned.

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. Wordsworth 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 offspring 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. Woman 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. Wordsworth is not typical of this aspect of romanticism, and consequently his representation of human nature is free from the defect of vagueness and insubstantiality. Although he eschews the element of love from his poems he has left us exquisite pictures of girlhood moulded by the healthy influences of nature, of good wives and of forsaken women and unmarried mothers.

Conclusion

The connection between the poet's life and his poetry is nowhere more intimate than in Wordsworth. The three types of woman which repeat themselves in his poems can be traced to the three women who played an important part in his life. To the unfortunate episode of his love for Annette Vallon by whom he had a daughter her owes his sympathetic insight into the lot of the forsaken women and unmarried mothers. While the poet's happy married life has inspired him to portray the many diligent and devoted wives in his poems, his sister, Dorothy, is the original of the numerous specimens of innocent girlhood and nature's children that he has presented to us. His relation with women were, on the whole, happy, and his attitude towards the sex is therefore entirely free from contempt and bitterness.

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