

# Sir William Watson's Wordsworth's Grave: A Critical Memorial Poem

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## Abstract

Sir William Watson's *Wordsworth's Grave* is the finest long poem, and the title suggests it to be elegiac. The prime purpose of an elegy is to express grief of the writer over the event of death. But *Wordsworth's Grave* was written long after the death of the poet and more over the intention was to appreciate the poetic achievement of Wordsworth. Thus, it is justified to consider it as a memorial poem rather than an elegy. The poem primarily estimates Wordsworth's worth and compares his commitment with his contemporaries.

Sir William Watson's *Wordsworth's Grave* is a finest long poem with 7 parts and the title suggests it to be elegiac. The prime purpose of an elegy is to express grief of the writer over the event of death. But *Wordsworth's Grave* was written long after the death of the poet and more over the intention was to appreciate the poetic achievement of Wordsworth. Thus it is justified to consider it as a memorial poem rather than an elegy.

William Watson (1858-1935) was knighted in 1917 in recognition of his contribution to English poetry, Initially Watson's writing resembles Tennysonian but his mature work was Arnoldian and Spender states that Watson's early poems were expressions in the romantic direction. The merit of Watson's method was that every word was perfectly chosen and perfectly placed and every cadence was perfectly modulated. The artistic excellence of his work invites comparison with that of Bridges. It appears that Watson wanted to be a people's poet, but he could not be as he lacked the versatility of Tennyson. However he received appreciation in superlative terms from two modern critics and poets- Mr. Spender and Mr. Palmer.

The poem *Wordsworth's Grave* not only speaks about the merits and greatness of Wordsworth but also glances at his contemporaries. He begins the poems by stating that nature does not forget him as the Roth lulls his repose with gentle murmur.

Rotha, remembering well who slumbers near,  
And with cool murmur lulling his repose (11).

Starting from the fanciful idea that Nature has not forgotten Wordsworth, complains that his contemporaries have forgotten him. And Watson asserts that someday people shall return to Wordsworth.

We that with vagrant soul his fixity  
Have slighted; faithless, done his deep faith wrong;

Left him for poorer loves, and bowed the knee  
To misbegotten strange new gods of song (11).

We, the pronoun in the above lines apply to the contemporaries of Watson of the late nineteenth century. We with our vagrant nature have slighted his constancy; we being ourselves faithless have failed to appreciate his deep faith. Wordsworth's constancy of belief in the immortality of the soul, of which intimations came to him from within, under the influence of nature. He believed in the existence of a spirit immanent in all mankind and in all things around man. We have neglected him for new and unworthy loves and have bowed to the strange and false masters of songs. The interest in Wordsworth's poetry has been increased only after Arnold pointed out the need of making a selection out of the poems of Wordsworth.

Yet, led by hollow ghost or beckoning elf  
Far from her homestead to the desert bourn,  
The vagrant soul returning to herself (12).

The proper home of the soul is faith, not faithlessness. Wordsworth with his teachings that the world should not be too much with us rather offers a refuge to the troubled soul in a distracting world. Turning from the faith and the spiritualism of Wordsworth to the absence of faith and to the gross materialism of the moderns, is as good as leaving the home for wilderness.

Not Milton's keen, translunar music thine;  
Not Shakespeare's cloudless, boundless human view;  
Not Shelley's flush of rose on peaks divine;  
Nor yet the wizard twilight Coleridge knew.  
What hadst thou that could make so large amends  
For all thou hadst not and thy peers possessed,  
Motion and fire, swift means to radiant ends? -  
Thou hadst, for weary feet, the gift of rest. (13).

It may be noted that Wordsworth did not possess the gifts like the other poets- Milton's gift of music, Shakespeare's clear and broad view of life, Shelley's spontaneous lyricism and Coleridge's gift of dealing with the supernatural. Or the people may not find the "motion and Fire" in Wordsworth but peace.

In the third part of the poem, Watson notices the worth of Wordsworth's spontaneity.

I hear it vouched the Muse is with us still; -  
If less divinely frenzied than of yore,  
In lieu of feelings she has wondrous skill  
To simulate emotion felt no more. (14)

Poetry in Watson's own day was not impassioned as of yore. In lieu feelings actually felt, the poets of the day had the skill to stimulate emotions.

Not such the authentic Presence pure, that made  
This valley vocal in the great days gone! -  
In his great days, while yet the spring-time played  
About him, and the mighty morning shone. (14)

In the above lines Wordsworth's best period as a poet is represented under the apt metaphor of spring. The best poetic period of Wordsworth's life is now represented as a radical morning, in contradiction to the last forty years which, with their lack of inspiration, could be represented as the hours of the declining day.

He felt the charm of childhood, grace of youth,  
Grandeur of age, insisting to be sung.  
The impassioned argument was simple truth  
Half-wondering at its own melodious tongue. (14)

Wordsworth in his *Immortality Ode* glorifies the perception of childhood and now all three i.e. childhood, grace of youth and grandeur of age, all come under one head- simple truth. It was Wordsworth's well-known aim to take up for his themes of ordinary, the familiar or the natural and yet so present them as to excite in readers feelings analogous to those roused by the extraordinary the unfamiliar or supernatural.

Wordsworth's constant complaint is that human beings are going away from nature and thus missing the essence and purpose of life. The sonnet, *The World Is Too Much with Us* by Wordsworth, is an ironical representation of human beings in relation to the world around. While nature furnish real beauty and pleasure, people run after artificial beauty. It is the typical human behaviour to neglect what they have and wish to get something not admirable and admissible. The poet very realistically presents the lost relationship between man and nature which applies even in the present context.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This Sea that bears her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;

For this, for everything, we are out of tune; (Rengasamy 20)

It is apt to quote here, R.W. Emerson the advocate of Transcendentalism who has published *Nature* a small book of 92 pages in September 1836. He begins the essay by asking "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the Universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of thesis? (Emerson 461). Emerson emphasizes that man should study nature in order to understand himself and Divine.

The fourth part of the poem deals with the poetry of the Age of Pope, and traces the course of English poetry from Pope to Wordsworth through Collins, Gray and Burns.

A hundred years ere he to manhood came,  
Song from celestial heights had wandered down,  
Put off her robe of sunlight, dew and flame,  
And donned a modish dress to charm the Town. (15)

A century before Wordsworth's day English poetry had had a steep fall from the celestial heights. The eighteenth century, the Age of Pope, which has been aptly called the Age of Reason, being an age more of prose than of poetry. By a rigid adherence to the heroic couplet as the metrical form par excellence, by objecting to allegory and all large play of imagination, by wanting all things in poetry to stand the test of reason, by conceiving of an antinomy between Man and Nature as the legitimate concern of poetry, the Age of Pope had brought English poetry to a sorry state indeed. The poets of the Pope's school were content to write for their contemporaries alone but not for all times. The fourth part of the poem also dwells on the period of transition from School of Pope to the precursors of the Romantics. Watson states that the age grew weary of the Muse's "sterile wit", and that the Muse herself grew weary of her

“loveless throne”. The age grew weary because “men felt life’s tide, the sweep and surge of it” but no reflection of all this in poetry. Naturally they longed for the living accent, the natural tone. All the while that the poets confined themselves to a pitiful narrow range of themes, life was, as ever, one inexhaustible fountain of themes; men joyed and wept as ever; life was, as ever, full of adventure; “love was sweet, life real, death no dream.” After that Johnson the Scholar-philosopher emerged lamenting “his toil unvalued and youth uncheered”. Later a new impulse sprang for love of nature from the pen of Gray and Collins. Watson also made a mention Goldsmith and Burns. Then there appeared, “those twin morning stars”, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Certainly they contributed and collaborated in the production of Lyrical ballads and thus Romantic Revival in English poetry. Thus Watson in the poem *Wordsworth’s Grave*, gives a complete account of the progress of English poetry through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When the world grew sick of sterile wit and poetry failed to mirror life, there arose poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge to guide them in the right direction and even today the world is in need of great poet philosophers like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Today’s situation captured by Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* suits best.

“It was best of times, it was worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...” (3).

#### Works Cited

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