

# Rhyme and Revolution

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## **Abstract**

*William Wordsworth's poetry stands as a reflection of the sociopolitical landscape of his time. His focus on the natural landscape instead of the sculpted is one of the best examples of artistic revolution in history, as Wordsworth uses his natural landscape focus as a way of protesting the rapidly developing Industrial Revolution in England. Beyond anything Wordsworth could have expected, however, this focus on natural landscapes, combined with his concern with a person's individuality, turned him into the progenitor of a new era of poetry and literature: the Romantic period. Thus, Wordsworth's poetry and ideals stand as a revolution of both the contemporary poetic style and sociopolitical ideals of his time.*

William Wordsworth is one of the most revered poets of the last few centuries. His works both revolutionized poetry and defined many of the motifs of the Romantic period all on their own. But, this revolution was a revolution on many fronts. William Wordsworth is often considered a gateway into a new era of poetry not only because of his new style but also because of the ideas that he explored. Although nature was not an unheard-of source of imagery for poetry before Wordsworth, he most certainly changed the way in which many looked at it. To Wordsworth, nature became a bastion of beauty and harmony in a world that was being upended by the Industrial Revolution. As the masses flooded into the cities, looking for work and leaving behind the lush greenery of the more rural lifestyle, Wordsworth fled from them, grasping to a beauty that was quickly becoming obsolete. Just as nature was becoming a source of beauty and rest for some, it became threatened by the looming Industrial Revolution. Thus, he stands as a revolutionary poet who worked to change the minds of his time towards a new way of thinking: one who upheld the beauty of nature as something higher than the works of humankind and saw boundless creativity as the true path of the artist. Beyond his interest in nature, though, Wordsworth also worked to change the political and religious spheres of England. In the glowing words of William Hazlitt in his *The Spirit of the Age*: “He takes the simplest elements of nature and of the human mind, the mere abstract conditions inseparable from our being, and tries to compound a new system of poetry from them; and has perhaps succeeded as well as anyone could” (Hazlitt 232).

Before breaking down how his writing was so revolutionary, however, it would be good to get a sense of the person behind the words. Wordsworth was born in 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumberland. His childhood was rural and comfortable until the deaths of both of his parents: one when he was eight and the other when he was thirteen. Although life became chaotic for some time after his parents’ deaths, he started writing poetry in grade school. He wrote throughout his schooling, often drawing on experiences he had had in nature and in his travels around most of Western Europe. He co-published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His poetry was radically political while he was young, but he became more conservative as he grew older. Upon the release of many of his earlier works, including *Lyrical Ballads*, he had many critics, who, although agreeing with his belief in making the language of poetry more common, disagreed with his use of imagery (Davies, ch. 8). But, soon enough, he became known and revered as a master of the craft, and most of his critics went mute. He died in 1850.

A comparison of Wordsworth’s poetic style to that of Alexander Pope highlights how revolutionary Wordsworth’s poetry was. Pope, much like Wordsworth, also championed a form of poetry: the heroic couplet. Pope brought the heroic couplet to its

peak, publishing many poems in this form, such as the *Essay on Man* or *Essay on Criticism*. Although the form allows for long-form poetry, it is also rigid and leaves little room for experimentation, especially in comparison to the variability of form and rhythm found in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*.

Where the two men differed the most, however, was in their themes. Pope's most famous works often focused on two things— the Great Chain of Being and landscap- ing—although his extensive poetic career leads to many other critical works and themes to be explored. Pope believed in the philosophical belief system known as the Great Chain of Being, which suggests that all of Creation is ordered in a specific way, and for any one thing to attempt to leave its station would be to upend the whole system. Wordsworth, on the other hand, saw nature as its own harmonious system created to be beneficial and self-sufficient, with man as a sort of outsider or as something which had fallen out of harmony with the rest of nature. This thought is characterized by a single phrase repeated twice in his poem "Lines Written in Early Spring": "What man has made of man" (Wordsworth, lines 8, 24). Unlike Pope, Wordsworth saw humankind as a force that often succeeds in destroying its own harmony and the harmony of the nature around it. This change in tune around humanity's place among the natural world was most likely brought on by the Industrial Revolution, a time which Pope never experienced and which Wordsworth lived through. During the Industrial Revolution, Wordsworth saw a side of humankind that Pope did not often see, if at all: the side of humanity that sees nature as nothing more than a place to develop and from which to extract resources. In Pope's time, although there was some manufacturing development, it was small-scale and limited to the largest cities and port towns. Wordsworth, however, watched in horror as humankind completely stripped the natural world, replacing it with massive industrial stonework and the black smoke of factories in almost every city in England.

Another concept that shows Wordsworth's radical change from previous poets is that of the landscape garden. Landscaping was a popular practice in Europe, and especially Great Britain, from the seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Landscaping was a way for human beings to subdue and manipulate the unruly wilds of nature into something more valuable, or, at least, that is how many saw it. Pope said this in his poem "To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington": "To build, to plant, whatever you intend,/ To rear the column, or the arch to bend,/ To swell the terrace, or to sink the grot,/ In all, let Nature never be forgot" (Pope, lines 47-50). Through the manipulation of nature in these landscape gardens, many, like Pope, thought that they were making nature more beautiful and more useful. This sentiment eventually slipped away into the Industrial Revolution, where making nature more beautiful was replaced with the idea

of transforming nature into a resource. Wordsworth stood against these ideas, along with many of his contemporaries at the time.

During Wordsworth's time, landscape gardening had changed radically. Instead of manipulating nature, the point was to capture it in its most untouched form. Landscape gardening went from trying to create something pleasing to the eye to an attempt to capture its natural beauty. The landscape garden, however "natural," was, to Wordsworth, artificial. That said, he was himself a committed gardener. Some have even argued that he should be viewed as one of the greater landscape architects. In his article "William Wordsworth, Landscape Architect," Ian H. Thompson says: "I believe it is appropriate to think of Wordsworth as a landscape architect, or at least as one of the spiritual and intellectual precursors of the profession, a view supported by the range, scale and depth of his interests in landscape beyond the boundaries of the garden" (196).

Although Wordsworth was a committed gardener, he never reconciled his views about nature with landscaping as, in almost all of his poetry, he uses naturally occurring landscapes as the sources of his imagery, not gardens. Consider the third stanza of "Lines Written in Early Spring": "Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,/ The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;/ And 'tis my faith that every flower/ Enjoys the air it breaths" (Wordsworth, lines 9-12). In most of Wordsworth's poems, there are descriptions like the one in "Lines Written in Early Spring": descriptions of nature, without human influence or human works, in its most natural and simplistic beauty. Wordsworth, unlike Pope, saw landscaping as a perversion of nature, not a way of making it more beautiful. This view is often seen as one of his most distinguishing features. In an essay by Linda R. Jeffrey, which is one of twelve essays in the book *Creative People at Work: Twelve Cognitive Case Studies*, she says, "A key feature of William Wordsworth's poetry is its naturalism. He was among a few poets of his epoch who made the first break with previous poetic tradition—by trying to write in natural language about natural things. He was also a nature poet because he literally went into 'Nature' in order to describe it" (71). The "natural language" is also something that sets him apart and is one of the most significant changes in form in English poetry.

Before Wordsworth, poets were often concerned with using "poetic" or lofty language in order to convey meaning. The use of a more common tongue was seen as a debasement of the artistry of poetry. This was most certainly an effect of the desire to imitate the Greek poets as well. Wordsworth, however, saw the loftiness of the language as quite the opposite. He thought it defeated the point of poetry, and that the use of a more common tongue actually added depth to the beauty of a poem instead of debasing it. William Christie argues this in his essay "Wordsworth and the Language of Nature":

“It [meaning the language of rustic life] approximated to, and represented [to Wordsworth], this paradisaical ideal in which all ‘conceptions’ are denoted ‘adequately,’ in which word and object come together in a way that differed radically from the licentious poetry of the previous century. What annoyed Wordsworth was the perversity with which his eighteenth-century predecessors had refused to call a spade a spade... ” (31).

The use of lofty words to accentuate images in poems was, to Wordsworth, a show of arrogance in the poet. He felt that it did nothing for the image or, in the worst cases, detracted from it. Instead, Wordsworth felt that common language better captured the beautiful and was comprehensible by every person instead of only the highly learned. Much like the ways in which landscaping nature was a way to make it more beautiful was egregious to Wordsworth, the manipulation of language to bring out the beauty in an image was artistically egregious.

These three elements of change that Wordsworth effectively pioneered do not necessarily make one a genius or a true revolutionary, however. What makes Wordsworth so potent and so important is how he stood in relation to the world of his time, and how much his challenges to the traditional shaped the next century of English poetry. In the words of Hazlitt: “Mr. Wordsworth’s genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age. Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of” (Hazlitt). There is a reason why Wordsworth is seen as the turning point into the English Romantic Period, and this reason goes far beyond just his style of poetry, going all the way down to his very soul.

Wordsworth’s “spirit,” for lack of a better term, took two revolutionary forms, one political and the other philosophical. Wordsworth was known to be a political radical, some of which was brought on by his traveling to France during the French Revolution (Davies, ch.4). He became a pro-democratic writer, which was seen in many of his letters, and some of his poetry as well. In “The Leech-Gatherer,” Wordsworth’s showing of a decrepit and poor older gentleman as wise and peaceful was something completely unheard of before-hand due to the hierarchal structure of British society. This can even be seen in the other name of this particular poem: “Resolution and Independence.” His “leveling spirit,” as Hazlitt says, along with his pro-democratic beliefs, made the showing of any person as intelligent and unique a necessity. In the poem, after meeting the leech-gatherer, the narrator says: “I could have laughed myself to scorn to find/ In that decrepit Man so firm a mind” (Wordsworth, lines 137-138). The leech-gatherer, who is a poor and destitute old man, would have never been shown as intelligent by many of the poets and novelists during or before the time of Wordsworth, as this worked against the strict hierarchal structure of British Society. Although Wordsworth was not the first to work

to bring about a change in how many viewed the poor or “lower classes,” his influence crafted through his poetry made the most impact. When he first showed the poor as intelligent, however, many seemed unsure or even upset at such an elevated and intimate view of someone of lower stature. In Gary Lee Harrison’s book, *Wordsworth’s Vagrant Muse: Poetry, Poverty, and Power*, he writes: “Wordsworth’s contemporaries’ reactions to his depiction of the rural poor—disbelief, mockery, and scorn—indicate that his audience was not fully prepared to grant the marginals and outcasts of their society a sense of character and history, a known and knowable self, and a place within the privileged space of the lyric poem” (71). What is most interesting, however, is that Wordsworth became a radical on both ends of the spectrum of the day.

In the mid-1790s, Wordsworth read the book, *Political Justice*, by William Godwin. Upon reading this book, he became a believer in the philosophy of Necessitarianism, which was a radical, although not uncommon, philosophical belief at the time (Chandler 258-263). William A. Ulmer, in his article “William Wordsworth and Philosophical Necessity,” says about Godwin’s form of philosophical necessity that “if Wordsworth believed in philosophical necessity as *Political Justice* formulated the idea and articulated its implications, he would have believed that human cognition and behavior were ultimately rational, that an impersonal obligation to the betterment of the whole remained our leading ethical obligation, that social progress was triumphantly inherent in the nature of existence” (176-177). Godwin believed and wrote that superior responses to problems would automatically prevail in any given situation, leading to optimism, which Wordsworth was unable to embrace. In fact, soon after being a convert, Wordsworth slowly distanced himself from Godwin’s works. By the time he published *Lyrical Ballads* a few short years later, he had all but abandoned the idea for something nearly opposite, with the preface to the second edition of the work, which was produced in 1800, acting, in many ways, as a critique of the belief he once held. Although Wordsworth’s political views were important and most certainly helped shape how many used poetry after him, it was his view of nature that became his crowning revolutionary achievement.

Wordsworth lived through the brunt of the British Industrial Revolution. Wordsworth, of course, rejected this, but his rejections go deeper than just him liking the outdoors. For Wordsworth, nature was a way for humankind essentially to return to its inner self. Wordsworth saw cities as a place where people were around other people so much that they, ironically, slowly lost their ability to be human. As trees fell for fuel and rivers were polluted with wastes, Wordsworth saw the sanity of humankind flowing down the creek as well. This firm belief in the healing power of nature and the “necessity” of getting away from humankind for itself would quickly be picked up by poets and writers

alike in the years after him. In no uncertain terms, Wordsworth could be considered one of the first major environmentalists, although he never became explicitly political with his beliefs about nature. This view soon became influential in the works of the Transcendentalists in the United States, along with it being a preliminary version of existential aesthetics, or, in other words, finding meaning in the beautiful.

The change towards a belief in the meaning of the beautiful and the use of feeling as a poetic device is part of the reason why he is considered the gatekeeper to the Romantic period. Most of Wordsworth's poems were based upon feeling (something which many of his critics opposed), and this poetic motif of feeling bled into love, beauty, and passion. This change, more than any other, is what cements Wordsworth as a revolutionary. The change from rigid and imitative poetry to free-flowing style based upon subjective and fleeting feelings is what led to the English Romantic Period and is why he is considered the gatekeeper to it. More than his politics, his philosophy, or even his use of language, his change towards fleeting feelings created by the observation of nature changed the way many thought about poetry.

William Wordsworth is a name above many in the realm of poetry. As the hallmark of age, he completely changed the way many thought about both poetry and the world around them. As a political activist, he brought thoughts of individualism and the freedom of thought to a country that had been stifling it. As a poet, he changed both its style and themes towards something that the world had effectively never seen outside of the realm of some of the Greek tragedies. In theory, he changed how one thought about human nature and tied this view to the importance of aesthetics. Wordsworth was, and still is, the epitome of a genius: one who has the heart to feel the smallest things, the intellect to turn those feelings into ideas, and hands which can turn those ideas into something beautiful.

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