

# William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson's Attitude to Nature: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract**—The article deals with the similarities between American Transcendentalism and British Romanticism, more precisely between William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson's influential engagement with Individualism and Nature. Wordsworth, one of the revolutionary thinkers of the Romantic period, has portrayed the life of the ordinary man in his poetry and Emerson, one of the founders of American Transcendentalism, has dealt with freethinking and the liberty of the people. The article focuses on the similar ideas delivered by both Wordsworth and Emerson in their respective writings in regard to their attitude to Nature. Wordsworth and Emerson argued establishing their view that to understand the world, we must go out there and engage with it ourselves, rather than relying on books and tradition to tell us what to think about it.

**Keywords:** Wordsworth, Emerson, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Nature, Individualism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The history of 19th century Europe is eventful. The Industrial Revolution as well as the French Revolution had a far reaching impact on all aspects of life. After these two movements in Europe, a new literary movement began in England called Romanticism, the aim of which was to give importance to the common people who were neglected so far by the new classicists who emphasized technical perfections rather than innovation or natural genius. Another significant factor of the period was writing should be concerned with "the momentous action of royal or aristocratic characters in an appropriately elevated style" which was totally different and contradictory to the Romantic Movement.

Let us turn our attention to America. For the American literature, the Romanticism derives mainly from the English Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, and from German Romantic philosophy.

Through the first half of the 19th century the pursuit of simplicity, utility, and perfection remained an American characteristic. The attitudes of America's writers were shaped by their New World environment and a series of ideas inherited from the romantic traditions of Europe. A new romanticism from continental Europe came to America. It was pluralistic; its manifestations were as varied, as individualistic, and as conflicting as the cultures and the intellects from which it sprang. Yet romantics often shared certain general characteristics: moral enthusiasm, faith in the value of individualism and intuitive perception, and a deep rooted presumption that the natural world was a source of goodness and man's societies a source of corruption.

When we talk about American Romanticism, we have to notice the Transcendentalism. In Europe it had been a philosophy only, but in America it took on some of the characteristics of a social movement.

As a cluster of ideas, transcendentalism reoriented American literature in such a decisive way as to bring about a body of work, principally by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, its proponents, and by Hawthorne and Melville, its skeptical critics, of such classical excellence and unprecedented maturity as to have merited being called in later years the "American Renaissance".

Transcendentalism is a philosophical, spiritual, and literary movement that developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in New England region of the United States. A core belief of transcendentalists is in the inherent goodness of people and nature. The transcendentalists believed in the innate divinity of every person and faith in his or her capability to understand immortality, the soul, and God through intuition rather than reason.

Transcendentalists have a deep reverence and admiration for nature, not only for aesthetic end, but also as an instrument to observe and comprehend the structured inner workings of the natural world.

In the American Romantic Period, Ralph Waldo Emerson made a great achievement. He is the most comprehensive and influential spokesman for Transcendentalism as well as for Romanticism. His book *Nature* (1836) and his essay *Self Reliance* made a famous reputation for him.

Emerson was responsible for bringing Transcendentalism to New England, and he was recognized throughout his life as the leader of the movement, yet he never applied the term “Transcendentalist” to himself or to his beliefs and ideas. He was one of the most influential of American thinkers, yet he had no elaborate, formal system of thought and he never attempted to create one. Emerson believed above all in individualism, independence of mind, and self-reliance. If Wordsworth brought people pure natural feeling, then Emerson gave this romantic feeling a sense of philosophical meaning.

Emerson’s poetry is uneven in quality, but always highly individual. His own poetry often displays these characteristics. In his day, Emerson’s poems were criticized for their lack of form and polish. In recent years, his poetry has received high praise. His harsh rhythms and striking images appeal to many modern readers as artful techniques. One of his great statements was in *The American Scholar*. Oliver Wendell Holmes called the speech “our intellectual Declaration of Independence”. In Emerson’s works, we can find many things came from Transcendentalism. It is a form of idealism that encompasses belief in intuitive (non-sensory) knowledge, the indwelling of divinity in man and nature. It stresses the unity of being—viewing God, man, and nature as sharers in a universal soul, which Emerson called the Over-soul. In order to feel the divine flowing through him, the transcendentalist turned to nature, seeking it in solitude. He had little use for religion in the traditional sense. His was a religion of nature, and he served as his own priest. In nature he not only worshiped but also learned, seeing even the smallest element of nature as a microcosm of the universe containing all its laws and meanings.

R. W. Emerson in *Nature* (1836) asserts, “the foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face...” and raises the fundamental question: “why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”

The philosophy that there is a fundamental bond between the self and the world that Wordsworth voices in “Tintern Abbey” parallels the latter teachings of transcendentalist philosophers. It’s fact that popular American transcendentalist R. W. Emerson visited Europe to meet his ideals, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Wordsworth, who no doubt reinforced his beliefs.

Alan Grob in his *The Philosophic Mind* argued for Wordsworth who moved from empiricism (1797-99) to transcendentalism (1804). The element of transcendentalism employs the theme of nature and this sets William Wordsworth’s attitude towards nature in his poetry, apart from his other contemporaries.

The importance on nature was given particularly after the publication of ‘Lyrical Ballads’ in 1798 which was a joint venture of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Wordsworth was deeply influenced by nature.

Representation of the natural environment is as old as recorded literature, and were prominent in the account of the Garden of Eden in the Hebrew Bible. Human beings are seen as beings whose spiritual nature places them midway between the animality of beasts and the divinity of gods.

Wordsworth’s poetry is distinguished by the simplicity and purity of his language. *The Prelude* is Wordsworth’s crowning achievement, the greatest and most original long poem since Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Its existence was unknown to the public until after Wordsworth’s death in 1850.

The theme in most of Wordsworth’s poems is that God is regarded as revealing Himself through the harmonious beauty of nature, and man’s moral character is formed and developed by participating in this harmony.

The permanent value of Wordsworth’s poems as a whole is given by De Quincey in a sentence. They have ‘brought many a truth into life both for the eye and for the understanding, which previously had slumbered indistinctly for all men’. It is much the same idea that Pope had expressed in his *Essay on Criticism* when he spoke of

Something whose truth convinc’d at sight we find,

That gives us back the image of our mind.

Wordsworth seemed to De Quincey to be the most original poet of his day. In meditative poetry he was without a rival since Shakespeare. When De Quincey said that Wordsworth’s poetry is distinguished by the extent of its ‘sympathy with what is really permanent in human feelings’ he did little more than put in his own words what the poet himself had said again and again. “My theme / No other than the very heart of man”.

Nature was to Wordsworth a living soul that reveals herself alike in the movements of the stars, the yearnings of the heart, the sleep of a great city, or the decay of a flower.

To every Form of being is assigned  
An *active* Principle : howe'er removed  
From sense and observation, it subsists

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Beyond itself, communicating good  
A simple blessing, or with evil mixed;  
Spirit that knows no insulated spot,  
No chasm, no solitude; from link to link  
It circulates, the Soul of all the worlds.

*The Excursion IX.*

He collects manna in the wild nature; he touches the barren rock for the gushing moisture. He uplifts the mean using the strength of his own aspirations; he covers the naked with beauty and wonder from the stories of his own tranquil recollections. No cypress grove loads his poetry with funeral pomp: but his imagination lends "a sense of joy / To the bare trees and mountains bare, / And grass in the green field." He has struck into the sequestered vale of simple and humble life, sought out the Muse among sheep-cotes and hamlets, and the peasant's mountain-haunts, and endeavoured to aggrandise the trivial, and the charm of novelty to the familiar. No one has expressed the same enthusiasm in raising trifles into importance. Wordsworth has spent his life in solitary musing or in daily communion with the face of nature. He has dwelt among varied pastoral scenes, till each object has become connected with a thousand feelings.

To the author of the *Lyrical ballads* nature is thought to be a kind of home; and he may be said to have taken a personal interest in the universe.

To him the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

The daisy looks to him with sparkling eye as an old acquaintance : the cuckoo haunts him always with sounds of early youth not to be expressed : a linnet's nest startles him with boyish delight : an old withered thorn is weighed down with a heap of recollections : a grey cloak, found on some wild moor, torn by the wind or drenched in the rain, afterwards becomes an primary object of imagination to him : even the lichens on the rock have a life and exists in his thoughts. He has described all these objects in such a way and with an intensity of feeling that no one else had done before him, and has given a new view or aspect of nature. Even to Shakespeare, these notices, as of all phenomena whatsoever that demanded a familiarity with nature in the spirit of love, became rarer and rarer.

Most men look at nature in the hurry of a confusion that distinguishes nothing; their error is from without. Pope and many who live in towns, make such blunders as that of supposing the moon to tip with silver the hills behind which she is rising, not by erroneous use of their eyes, but by inveterate preconceptions. Scarcely has there been a poet with what could be called a learned eye, or an eye extensively learned, before Wordsworth. Much affectation there has been of that sort since his rise, and at all times much counterfeit enthusiasm; but the sum of the matter is this, that Wordsworth had his passion for nature fixed in his blood.

One of the natural appearances which must have haunted men's eyes since the Flood, but yet had never forced itself into conscious notice until arrested by Wordsworth, we may notice an effect of iteration daily exhibited in habits of cattle:

The cattle are grazing,

Their heads never raising,

There are forty feeding like one.

Wordsworth's poem "The Simpon Pass" depicts the effects of forestation. He seems to create awareness against the ongoing impact of human civilization on nature "The immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed".

Undoubtedly it is to be admitted that most Romantic poets were against the so-called civilized society of the city. Emerson also felt the same. Wordsworth had an unfavorable outlook toward London. Due to the rapid urbanization that resulted from the Industrial Revolution, the city began to lose its natural beauty. That is why, P.B. Shelley compared London with hell. However,

even though Wordsworth felt this way about London, he discovered the innocent beauty of London by ignoring the vanity of urbanization.

Emerson's attitude toward city life is similar to that of Wordsworth's. Like his contemporaries, Emerson also thought that people living in the city are living hectic lives. Staying away from natural beauty, people often begin to emphasize different kinds of materialistic desires. That is why in 'Nature' he opines that after living a busy day, if an attorney or tradesman comes into contact with nature, he transforms from a material creature to a man.

"...may suggest the advantage which the country-life possesses for a powerful mind, over the artificial and curtailed life of cities"

Wordsworth's definition of the nature of poetry as propounded in the 1802 'Preface' is important, and has to be quoted at length before we proceed further. He states: "...poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to that it is carried on..." Poetry, according to Wordsworth, should seek to present the image of man and nature. The poets of his age, he felt, did not look "steadily at the object". As a result, they could not portray man and nature truthfully. His poetry would be close to real life, it was for the reason of presenting the basic human affections that he went to the common and rustic folk. Nature inhabits in his poems as a separate or independent entity and is not treated in a casual or passing manner. Wordsworth follows Nature in a way different from that of Pope. Unlike Pope, Wordsworth truly believed that in city life and its distractions men had overlooked nature and that they had paid for it.

A sense of the health and integrity of the life of nature, in contrast with the depredations by humanity is exemplified in 'Lyrical Ballads' by Wordsworth's 'Lines Written in Early Spring':

I heard a thousand blended notes,  
While in a grove I state reclined,  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind

His poem 'The Tables Turned' (1798) is a great example to prove that Wordsworth has a strong faith in the great power of Nature that educates human mind and guides it to the perfect direction. In this poem Wordsworth states that Nature is the ultimate source of perfect health, wealth, and cheerfulness. He writes:

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

In his 'Lucy Poems' we find nature makes Lucy spontaneous and free, although with a sense of bond to a greater law than mere mortal conventions her nature morally good. In his 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' Wordsworth regrets the passing of a childhood state when the immortal origins of the soul seemed everywhere apparent. 'Tintern Abbey' which is considered one of the great masterpieces of Wordsworth combines poetry with philosophy and articulates the doctrine of the New Age. In this poem the poet narrates the great power of the contemplation of a beautiful scene of nature to heal and soothe the perturbed mind of man, and to give him thrills of pleasure. In this poem he emphasized the moral influence of Nature. He spiritualized Nature and considered her with heart as a great moral teacher, as the best mother, guardian and nurse of man. He believed that there exists between man and nature a spiritual bond. "The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all moral being." (111-113; Tintern Abbey)

## II. CONCLUSION

The comparison of the opinions of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wordsworth shows many conspicuous resemblances. Both Emerson and Wordsworth are fascinated by the natural world and both perceive Divinity in it. They both had insights into the state of connectedness with God. For both authors, nature represents a place of joy and beauty. For both of them, nature also represents a wise teacher for all humanity, full of secrets that no mind can ever fully understand.

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