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Common People and Simple Life in Wordsworth's Poems

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"The cock is crowing, / The stream is flowing, / The small birds twitter, / The lake doth glitter / The green field sleeps in the sun; / The oldest and youngest /Are at work with the strongest; / The cattle are grazing, / Their heads never raising; / There are forty feeding like one!"

During the eighteenth century, priggish and highly sculpted forms prevail in English poetry. William Wordsworth stands out with common and natural language. In his poems, his language is simple, his emotion true, and his rhyme beautiful. Wordsworth is fond of the simple life in the countryside. In the whooping on the top of the bare hill. There is joy in the mountains and there is life in the fountains. In the picturesque common place, his idiot boys, solitary women, the poor pariahs, the forlorn old and the painful sick lead a purer and more innocent existence. They reflect the original state of nature.

Wordsworth chooses subjects from common, low and rustic life and uses normal and everyday language to bring poetry within the reach of the average person. He wants to express the living poem *Written in March*, the snow has retreated like an army defeated. The rain is over and gone. The sky is blue and the clouds are sailing. The ploughboy is voice and emotion of the common people. In his famous "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" Wordsworth explained his poetical concept:

> "The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible , in a selection of language really used by men"[1]

Wordsworth believes that children are the most innocent and have no knowledge of the painful reality. In the poem *We Are Seven*, he encounters a

[1] 罗经国编注，《新编英国文学选读下》，北京大学出版社，第 8 页。

little eight-year-old country girl with very fair eyes. The poet couldn't help asking her questions. "How many sisters and brothers do you have?" "We are seven in all." "Where are they?" "Two are in Wales, two are at sea, and two are buried in a churchyard."[2] Poet is confused and tries to make her know that there are only five left, for two have died. The girl just ignores the poet's logic and talks about her own version. She tells that their graves are green and she often knits her stockings, hems her handkerchief, sits and sings to them, brings her porridge and eats her supper after sunset. They are still living in her world. Child's view of point is different from grown-ups. She has no knowledge of death and nothing can separate her from her siblings. Wordsworth writes down this common conversation because his heart is tugged by her love towards her siblings which cannot be changed by anything even death.

In Wordsworth's poems, children are carefree and sometimes absent-minded to their work. In *Idle shepherd boys*, the two boys almost lose a lamb. "Beneath a rock, upon the grass, / two boys are sitting in the sun; / their work, if any work they have, / is out of mind."[3] They are indulging themselves in the beautiful scenery. Around them, the valley rings with mirth and joy. The hills echo a never ending song. The magpie chatters with delight. The young birds leave their mother and the nest. They go rambling east and west in search of their own food. The two boys forget that a thousand lambs are on the rocks. Having rested enough, they leap and run for a race. Walter sees that he should lose the race. So he calls his comrade James to stop and proposes another race to cross the arch over the stream. Suddenly Walter totters in the middle when hearing a piteous moan. The boy is scared. His face is pallid as a ghost, his pulse is stopped and his breath is lost. After he calms down, he finds out that the moan is from a lamb. The lamb has slipped into the stream. Thank God! It is safe without wound. Its dam has seen it when it down. With all a mother's love, she cries from the lofty rocks above. All of them are calling for help. By chance poet who "loves the brooks for better than the sages' books"[4] strays there. He helps to draw the lamb from the pool. The two boys take the lamb into their arms and go quickly to place him at his mother's side. The poem describes this little accident because it really happens in playful children's daily life.

Another intriguing story of the absent–minded children is the idiot boy. Set in the countryside, *Idiot Boy* tells the story of Betty Foy and her beloved mentally handicapped son Johnny. Foy's piteous neighbor Susan who lives alone is sick. Foy has no choice but to send her son into the nearby village to fetch the doctor. She places him on her pony and sends him on his way. Wordsworth vividly describes how the little boy's heart is full of glee when driving. "And Johnny's

[2] *Classic Poetry Series William Wordsworth poems*, PoemHunter.com-The World's Poetry Archive, p469.
[3] Ibid, p142
[4] Ibid, p143

lips they burr, burr, burr, / as on he goes under beneath the moon"[5] After several hours, Johnny does not come back. Poor Susan lies in bed with more moans and groans. Foy is in a bad quandary. She worries that Johnny may be drowned or lost or perhaps never be found. Mother is by nature over worried about children's safety, let alone her son is not so wise. She tells Susan that she must set off to find him, for he is "half-wise". In mother's eyes, her son is not an idiot but just not wise enough. Wordsworth depicts how she is anxious and finds everywhere, in high and low, in above and below, in great and small, in round and square, in tree and bush. She fears that he climes into an oak and stays there till he is dead. She doubts the wicked pony carries Johnny to dark cave. She goes to the doctor's door and "lifts the knocker, rap, rap, rap."[6] But the doctor has not seen the boy; finally, she finds him grazing near a stream, placidly astride his pony. Little Johnny indulges himself in the tranquility and imagination. "The cliffs and peaks so high they are, / to lay his hands upon a star, / and in his pocket bring it home".[7] Foy exults, sits down and begins to weep. She has never shed such tears before. On their way home, the mother begs her son to tell her what he has heard and what he has seen all this long night. He answers "The cock did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / and the sun did shine so cold!"[8] What an absurd answer! The cock in his word is actually an owl which he doesn't know. The cold sun is actually the moon. He has heard the owl's song and enjoyed the cold moon from eight to five. Children look at things from different perspectives, absurd as they are in adults' eyes.

Another silly boy who lacks reason and logic is Edward in *Anecdote for Fathers*. The narrator has a five-year old son, Edward. He is slim and graceful in his rustic dress. One morning, "we" stroll around. "I" idly ask him which one he prefers, the Kilve's shore or Liswyn farm. In careless mood, he answers, "I would rather be at Kilve than here at Liswyn farm." "I" am curious to know the reason why he chooses Kilve because Liswyn farm is sweet and warm and has woods and hills. The little boy hangs down his head and blushes with shame. "I" ask Edward three times and then he raises his head and catches sight of the glittering bright, broad and gilded vane upon the housetop. The boy eases his mind with the reply "At Kilve there was no weather-cock and that's the reason why."[9] In adults' eyes, it is a ridiculous answer. While to children, love is love, there needs no reason. Why do adults always want reason? It echoes Wordsworth's idea that "the child is father of the man".

Besides innocent children, the beauty and dignity of an idealized woman who lived unnoticed by all others are also cherished in Wordsworth's poem. In *Lucy poems*, poet portrays such a solitary and unknown woman. Whether Lucy is based on a real woman or is a figment of the poet's imagination

[5] Ibid, p131
[6] Ibid, p136
[7] Ibid, p138
[8] Ibid, p141
[9] Ibid, p46

doesn't matter. One thing is sure: she is always on poet's minds. Wordsworth even doesn't know how to start, when to remember and how to forget his love. Through poems, we could roughly get a whole picture of Lucy's life.

Lucy Gray is a solitary child. She dwelt on a wide moor with no mate and no comrade. She could watch the young deer play and rabbit run in the grass. In the poem *Three years she grows in sun and shower*, Nature decides to make Lucy the loveliest flower on earth. She is gorgeous and breath-taking beautiful. The floating clouds shall lend to her. The willows bend for her. The midnight stars shall be dear to her.

She lives in the solitary place where few people go. She is just like a violet hiding under the mossy stone beyond people's eyes. Although she is as fair as shining star in the sky, none praise her beauty or fall in love with her because they never see her. She doesn't need to doll herself up for him who loves her. Lucy is herself for nature and her own. She is unknown to the world from birth to dead but she is special to me. Suddenly Nature speaks, "the work was done". In a stormy night, her father tells her to go to town with a lantern. She never could reach the town. Her parents weep and follow her footprint the next day. The marks disappear in the middle of the bridge. They are afraid that Lucy dies and leaves them since only the past calm and quite scene is left. The gulf between life and death is the longest distance in the world.

In Wordsworth's poems, common people experience the ups and downs, have smiles and tears, live with loves and hates, and go through fortunes and miseries. He depicts the real life with sympathy.

Last of the Flock is about a man's miserable life. Poet meets a man with tears along the broad highway. In any occasions, it is strange to see a healthy, full grown man weeping in the public roads alone. He seems robust but he is sad with a lamb in his arms. When he sees poet, he turns aside and wishes to hide. He attempts to wipe his salty tears away with his coat. Poet requires what troubles him. He answers, "Shame on me. Sir! This lusty lamb, / he makes my tears to flow."[10] He fetches it from the rock but it is the last of all his flock. He used to be a young and single man. He raised a single ewe. One sheep became fifty and then a flock. He was rich and married. He had six children to feed. He sold a sheep and bought his little children bread. Since then his flock dwindled and dwindled, one by one. It is woeful for him to see his sheep fade away together with his care and pains. What he could do, he loves his sheep but he has to sell this last sheep for his family. The poet commiserates with him over his story.

The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman is about a miserable woman. Her child is took away from her arms and given to another woman. She is young but desperate and wants to die before she could see another day. Food, clothes, fire and

[10] Ibid, p164

warm can give her no joy. If she could see her child again she would die with happy heart. What child to mother is water to fish. Same with *Idiot Boy*, mother is always obsessed with children.

Mothers also always suffer a lot from lost of children. In *Sailor's Mother*, one foggy morning in winter, poet meets a woman, tall, straight and not old and asks her what she bears under her cloak to protect from the cold air. It is a little singing-bird belonging to her dead son. Her son dies whey sailing in Denmark. She travels miles to see if he remains something for her. He always brings the bird in voyages but this time he leaves the bird in lodge. The bird becomes the only thing her son leaves her.

Wordsworth is in awe of independent old men. In *Resolution and Independence* he at first sympathizes with a forlorn old man. He is in his extreme old age, neither all alive nor dead. His body bends down like a pilgrim. After talking, poet begins to revere this independent laborer, who earns his living by hard working. "From pond to pond he roamed, from moor to moor; / Housing, with God's good help, by choice or chance; / and in this way he gained an honest maintenance."

Nature becomes the only comfort to these lonely old men. *I know an old man constrained to Dwell*. He lives in a large public charity house and has no company. Although he is poor and has to live on subsidy, he feeds a Redbreast. The bird pecks the crumbs upon his knee. They have common peace, simple play and mutual gladness. His wife, children and relatives are dead and gone. He still loves the bird and the bird becomes the only living thing he could love.

Wordsworth is also in awe of beggars. In *The Old Cumberland beggar*, poet sees an aged beggar by the highway side. In the sun, he sat and ate his food in solitude. The crumbs scatter and fall on the ground from his palsied hand. The small mountain bird dares not to peck their destined meal but wait in a short distance. Although he is clothed in rags, kind-hearted country people don't hold him in contempt. The sauntering horseman doesn't throw money from his horse. He reins his horse and stops to put the coin in the old man's hat safely. The woman who is in charge of the toll-gate quits her work and lifts the latch to let him cross if she sees the beggar is coming. The post-boy rides past him gently without a curse upon his lips or anger at his heart. The poet disagrees with upper class people that the beggar is a burden of the earth. It is nature's law that the one without talents, without power, without wisdom, the brute, the dullest or most noxious should exist. Live and let live. Let the beggar breathe and live but for himself alone. Let him breathe the freshness of the valleys. Let his blood struggle with frosty air and winter snows. Let the wind sweeps and beat his withered face. What a blessing! He is not imprisoned by the industry. Let him, where and when he will, sit down beneath the

trees, or on a grassy bank or highway side, and with the little birds share his chance-gathered meal. In the eye of nature he has lived.

William Wordsworth likes people in nature. They live far away from industrial society, in the hug of nature and are self-sufficient. He prefers idiot boys, mad women, beggars, the old and the sick because they are sheer unpolluted people. In "civilized" people's eye, these people are shallow and inferior. In his poems, they live in harmony with nature. They are mentally healthy, honest and kindhearted. He introduces those simple, uneducated country people as the subject of poetry to modern literature.

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[3]. *William Wordsworth* Updated Edition, Edited and with an introduction by Harold Blomm, Sterling Professor of the Humanities Yale University.

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