Afropolitan Journals

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ISSN: 2760-5689X www.afropolitanjournals.com

Romanticism in the 21st Century: Re-Interpreting Wordsworth's *The World is Too Much with Us*

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Abstract

Romanticism is a period that displayed an intense reaction to the industrial revolution and enlightenment that arose during the mid-18th and early 19th century. In this period, people began to work in factories located in rural/urban areas and in its wake, nature was destroyed to build the factories. The romantic period frowned at this and in reaction writers had a lot to say on the prevailing situation. William Wordsworth was a key figure in the Romantic school of thought. He has written a lot of poems exploring this theme; appreciation of nature. The theoretical framework employed for the study is ecocriticism which is an interdisciplinary link between literature and the natural environment; this will be used for the analysis of the poem. The method used for collecting data is library based. This study examines the poem *The World is Too Much with Us* by William Wordsworth re-interpreting it in the 21st century as a panacea to the lack of appreciation and neglect of nature.

Keywords: Romanticism, Industrial Revolution, Nature, William Wordsworth, Panacea.

Introduction

This study explores the relevance of William Wordsworth's poem *The World Is Too Much With Us* in the 21st century focusing on the theme of materialism and its impact on human-nature relationships. The study delves into the historical context of romanticism, Wordworth's background and his contributions to the romantic movement. The industrial revolution was a period of major mechanization and innovation that began in Great Britain during the 18th and early 19th century and later spread throughout much of the world. The industrial revolution led to inventions such as steam engine, telegraph and internal combustion engine. The increase in the number of factories led to pollution, deplorable working and living conditions. The 21st century has heralded massive growth and development; scientifically and technologically. The pursuit of money showcases man's insatiable thirst for accumulation of wealth which is paramount to the point that materialism is the new religion. Man is blinded from appreciating relationships, honouring promises and loving nature. The love of nature was championed by poets who appreciated it, worshipped and called for its sustenance with renewed optimism. The Romantic period asserts Kastan (2006) was an intellectual movement originating in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. It was an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement. The period was at its peak from1800 to 1850. It assigned a high value to the achievement of heroic,

individualistic and artistic, whose examples it maintained, would raise the quality of society. It also promoted the individual imagination as a critical authority allowed of freedom from classical notions of form in art. Romanticism was characterized by its emphasis on emotion and individualism, clandestine literature, paganism, idealization of nature, suspicion of science and industrialization, as well as glorification of the past with a strong preference for the medieval rather than the classical. The movement emphasised intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as fear, horror, terror and awe that expressed the sublime beauty of nature. It was also interested in ancient customs, folk lore and spontaneity. Romanticism according to Kors (2022) arose as a reaction against rationalism and enlightenment. It drew upon the French revolution's rejection of aristocratic social and political norms. It was also influenced by the evolution and uniformitarian which argued that 'the past is the key to the present'. This led to the romantics to look back with nostalgia to the middle age and elements of art and narrative from the medieval period. The word romantic is derived from the term romance which means poetic heroic narrative originating in the medieval. The flaw in the enlightenment way of thinking represented by Immanuel Kant had its emphasis on intellect (reason) and will, disregarding emotion which is important to man. Romantic movement has lasting appeal to the human mind because emotion is stronger and intense than the intellect. The romantics emphasized imagination and strong emotion; rather than an epistemology of deduction, the romantics demonstrated knowledge through intuition. Romanticism according to Kors (2002) was a movement focused on individualism and the love of nature. The poems written during the age of romanticism questions the rationale/destruction behind modernization after the industrial revolution. Man lacks the ability to appreciate nature around him but is engrossed in amassing wealth which destroys nature. The poem is a call to revive love of nature. Though, it was partly a reaction to the industrial revolution, the social and political norms of the age of enlightenment, but also the scientific rationalization of nature. It was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music and literature. It had a significant and complex effect on politics with romantic thinkers influencing conservatism, liberalism, radicalism and nationalism. Wordsworth was the leading voice of romanticism together with Coleridge, Bysshey, and Bryon to mention a few.

Kaston (2006) asserts that William Wordsworth was born on April 7,1770 in the Lake District of Northern England, the second of five children of a modesty prosperous Estate Manager. He lost his mother when he was 7 and his father when he was 13, upon which the orphan boys were sent off by guardian uncles to a Grammar school at Hawkshed, a village in the heart of the Lake District. At Hawkshed, Wordsworth received an excellent education in classics, literature and mathematics, but the advantage to him was the chance to indulge in boyhood pleasures of living and playing outdoors. The natural scenery of the English lakes could terrify as well as nurture as Wordsworth would later testify in the line of his poem 'I grew up fostered alike by beauty and by fear'. The poem was a response to the demise of the cottage industry and rural way of life which had been taken over by mass production

and establishment of industries. People were no longer in touch with nature. His wife Mary Hutchinson is said to have attended the same school with Dorothy Wordsworth his sister. He lost his mother when he was seven years old and made his debut as a writer in 1787 when he published a sonnet in the European magazine. In that same year he entered St John's College, Cambridge from where he took his B.A in 1791. Dave cottage was his home and his family for eight and a half years (1799-1850). Here he wrote many of his famous poems. Wordsworth loved and drew inspiration from this landscape of the Lake District home. There are many ideas linked with the romantic poetry, but one of the most prominent was to show the connection between human experience and the natural world. Wordsworth loved to travel, he went to France on a walking tour where he had an affair with a French girl, and the affair was a basis for the poem *Vaudracour and Julia*. In 1795, he received bequest of nine hundred pounds which gave him means to pursue a literary career. He was encouraged by his friend Coleridge and his contact with nature, Wordsworth composed his first master piece; *Lyrical Ballads* which opened with Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. In 1798 he started to write a large and philosophical autobiographical poem 'The Prelude', a romantic epic poem chronicling the growth of a poet's mind.

This study examines Wordsworth's poem in light of prevailing circumstances in the 21st century. The poem was written to express dismay and a reflection on the destruction of nature in the guise of development. Indeed, the developments have changed the outlook of society but have completely neglected nature. The poems will expose the views of Wordsworth in relation to man's inordinate desire to amass wealth and in the process forget to look back to appreciate nature.

Statement of the Problem

The 21st century has had a paradigm shift in literary works that deals with man, corruption, disillusionment, insurgency and kidnapping in the society. Literary works such as poetry; prose and play/drama have explored different issues affecting man. William Wordsworth is a poet of the romantic period whose major theme in his works is the appreciation of nature. In contemporary times, man is engrossed in accumulating wealth through different means that he destroys and neglects nature in this quest. In this vein, it becomes pertinent to re-interpret Wordsworth's poem, *The World Is Too Much With Us* for a better understanding and appreciation of nature as portrayed in the poem and find a lasting solution to the degradation of nature and man's obsession to material things.

Theoretical Framework

The theory appropriate for this study is ecocriticism which deals with literature and the physical environment. The theory will try to find out how nature is represented in the text and the role environment play in the text. According to Estok (2005) Ecocriticism is more than simply the study of nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is a theory that is committed to effect change by analyzing the function-thematic, artistic, social, historical, and ideological or otherwise of the natural environment or aspects of it, represented in

documents that contribute to material practices in material worlds. The poem *The World is Too Much with Us* seeks to change the perception of man towards nature. The acquisition of wealth draws man away from that which is relevant; the loss is monumental such that we do not appreciate what we see. Ecocriticism revives the appreciation of nature and ways to preserve it is found in literary text such as Wordsworth's poem.

Literature Review

Wordsworth is one of the celebrated poets of the romantic period, a master of capturing the beauty and power of nature in his works. His poems inspire readers and lover of nature alike all over the world, makes him stand out as a timeless literary figure. Wordsworth's writing focused on life's daily experience. His philosophy of life surrounds the notion that nature can restore the dignity of man and be a great source of inspiration. He had a way of giving hope and life with his words.

Wordsworths Works

William Wordsworth has written a lot of poems highlighting his school of thought, romanticism. Wordsworth's poems include; *I wandered lonely as a cloud, Daffodils, Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, My Heart Leaps Up, Lines Written in early Spring, London 1802, Ode: Intimations of Immorality from Recollections of Early Childhood, To my Sister, Surprised by Joy, The Tables Turned, The Solitary Reaper, Character of a happy warrior and to a Butterfly, A Character, A Night thought* just to mention a few. During his life time, he wrote 387 poems. He was a prolific writer and his perception of seeing, observing and understanding nature was his contribution to romantic poetry. Key features of Wordsworth's poems relate to spiritual reverence for nature, distaste for modernity, an interest in the individual and imagination, a fascination with childhood and the use of everyday language that is discernible to everyone.

Kroebar (1963) argues that Wordsworth's poems can cause the reader to rise above the earthly situation and think about the spiritual realm and the human soul, just like *The World is Too Much with Us* does. Jain (2012) claims that man's selfish exploitation of nature has brought our planet into much danger. It has created a fatal situation by devastating and despoiling its resources and biosphere. Natural disasters such as tsunami, volcano, and pandemic have forced the human society to rethink the significance and relevance of nature for human survival. Islam (2021) claims that man in the time of distress seeks solution by going back to nature. The covid-19 pandemic is a case in study threatening man and animal's co-existence. Wordsworth convincingly and courageously regarded nature as the 'guardian of all moral being'. Nature was all in all to him.

Oliver (2023) asserts that Wordsworth wrote the poem when he was 32 years old in 1802. The poem is a Petrarchan sonnet. Published in 1807, it offers a miniature manifesto for romanticism, as Wordsworth bemoans the ways that modern life is preventing us from fully appreciating the wonders of the natural world. The poem is about the loss of nature and the chase for money leading to chaos in the society. It is a representation of human love of

wealth more than nature. The poem puts us in touch with literature and the world of myth. The poet sees nature as vast, large and indefinite whereas it is incomplete, little and insignificant to the people. *The World is Too Much with Us* speaks to our societal disconnect with nature. Reinterpreting the poem in the 21st century, it can be argued that the preference of financial gains and consumer culture over human interaction is paramount. The poet speaks about worldly cares such as money, possessions and power, man uses his mind, time, and energy to seek temporary fulfilment; the poem has 14 lines. The opening lines of the poem laments the situation society is embroiled in. However, upon reinterpreting the poem it can be argued that it criticizes consumer culture in the 21st century and the wanton amassing of wealth over human relation in the modern world. Money is amassed from different sources and is used for frivolous activities such as parties, shopping, and picnics and to some extent crime. Indeed, the world is too much with us for man has become insatiable in his quest to amass wealth. The 21st century is full of intriguing events that showed that romanticism should be revived to bring back our humanity. The destruction of nature, felling of trees, and destruction of vegetation have caused a major setback in human interaction. The romantic poets of the 17th century sought to highlight other aspects apart from nature such as individualism, freedom, and moral values. Muallim (2022) focuses on the elements of nature found in the poem. He contrasts the ideas of romanticism over the materialistic society which is the product of enlightenment. He argues that the appreciation of nature was borne as a result of enlightenment, and poets like Wordsworth's perception of nature. The sea, moon, sleeping flowers, winds are key elements of nature. Wordsworth abundantly uses these elements in his poems for emphasis. Farooq and Chandra (2012) believe that nature has a healing capacity and it is the panacea for all ailments.

It is pertinent to note that romanticism is still in existence but it has achieved a new perspective with the literary theory Ecocriticism also known as romantic ecology or green romantic. Ecocriticism is a contemporary theory of analysing art or literature from nature's perspective. Ecocriticism was coined in 1978 by William Ruekert in his essay 'Literature and Ecology': An Experiment in Ecocritism. Ecocritics investigates such things as the underlying ecological values, what precisely is meant by the word nature and whether the examination of place should be a distinctive category much like class, gender or race. They examine human perception of wilderness, and how it has changed throughout history or not current environment issues are accurately represented or mentioned in popular culture and modern literature. Ecocritics determine the actual meaning of nature writing in texts, but they use those texts for analyzing the practices of society in relationship to nature. Romanticism evolved down the ages to become Ecocriticism. Mishra (2017) argues that ecocriticism is re-thinking nature in view of the global environmental crisis. He argues that the prime concern of both the romantic and ecocritics is that nature never betrays the heart that loves her. One of the aims of romanticism is to bring back the glorious age of the past in order to escape the turmoil of the age. The romantics tried to escape from the corrupt social system to take shelter in the ideal world of nature .A lot of nature conservationist in the 21st century

are fighting to preserve nature amidst the chaos of development, massive destruction, taking down abodes of many animals and men alike, rendered homeless. The poem *The World is Too Much With Us* is evidently about this period where pursuit of material things has overtaken man's consciousness.

The 21st century has undergone a lot of development in politics, socio-economic interactions of man. Knowledge has spread near and far. Man, a social animal is talented in creating, fabricating tools that will enhance his lifestyle. But the 21st century has turned a blind eye to the appreciation of nature. William Wordsworth the leading father of romanticism feels the impact of nature to the wellbeing of man. Though he does not entirely dislike industrialization; his main concern is the attachment to materialistic things which for him is the bane of man. The movement is found in literary works that are still studied in schools. In this era romanticism can be said to be still in existence but far from what Wordsworth meant it to be. There has never been a time when governments, Nongovernmental organisations, individuals in the 21st century who have great interest in preserving nature coexist side by side to protect our natural habitat. There is an increase in the appreciation of nature from different perspectives; the concern for some is preservation of animals, trees, while others the landscapes of hidden waterfalls, gardens and natural resources found in the earth. The world is not dependent on the wealth an individual has but the capacity to use the wealth to beautify and preserve nature. Wordsworth's poem draws our attention to those things that the eye appreciates, the heart delights and the mind finds tranquillity in them. The beauty of nature allows us to exist in harmony, to benefit from the elements. Wordsworth believed that man has lost all sense of purpose. In contemporary times, man has helped to preserve all the wonders placed in the world either by individual ownership or government control. The springing up of markets requires a large land; this in retrospect means the destruction of nature for worldly gains. The romantics also focus on materialism, the pursuit of money from any source be it legal or illegal though nature plays an important role in the acquiring of materialistic assets or wealth; suffice to say, Wordsworth was content with the appreciation of nature, individualism and relationships. Wordsworth in particular was not a wealthy man but was a contented man; his poems seeks to arouse the appreciation of nature which is innate in man. He believes industrialization is the harbinger of loss both to man and the world.

Analysis of the Poem: The World is Too Much with Us

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!

The opening line of the poem is a cry, lament; here the emphasis is on getting and spending, 'we lay waste our power' the obsession of accumulating wealth dominates modern western

and African society. Man has become absent minded in his pursuit of wealth that lay waste his power;

Wordsworth refers to the world, as a place/abode where humans abide. Man in this world seeks to survive and interact with one another. The attachment of man to the world is the quest for material things. 'Whether late or soon' acquiring money is prominent in man's struggle. 'Getting and spending' focusing on material things, on empty soulless delights these things can provide. We lay waste our powers, here the poet said in search of meaningless things; we expend all our power to achieve it. Little we see in nature that is ours. Wordsworth points out that we are negligent of nature knowing full well that all that we see does not belong to us, the mountains, sun, moon, rainbow, birds flowers etc in this instant we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon. Man's heart has lost the compassion and passion to the pursuit of money, material items that its benefit is transient. After accumulating wealth, man does not feel contented; the desire is for more and more. Corruption has become endemic due to man's love of money. It appears in different dimension and shades; kidnapping for ransom, ritual sacrifices done to gain access to the underworld, betrayal by family members and friends, mistrust and disillusionment have emerged in communities that has disrupted peaceful coexistence. In today's world where the industries have been established, they are yet to find solace in this development. This process has led to neglect of nature and its conservation. Man made weapons that completely destroy nature; industries also pollute the environment and rivers hereby causing health risks.

Furthermore, Wordsworth makes a connection between this obsession with getting and spending and the spiritual loss of society. The poet is addressing the effect of materialism dominating the western society and by extension the African continent. He links getting and spending and the spiritual loss of society. "We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon". The pursuit of wealth and material goods has blinded us to the value of items that make life worth living like connection, relationship and love.

The 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;

The poet admires the sea that bears her bosom to the moon, an intense imagination of nature. He further describes the sea, wind and flowers in complete harmony. The connection is achieved by his use of personification. The sea bares her bosom to the moon suggests an intimacy between the moon above and the sea below. The wind howls portrays the myriad emotion of human beings while the flowers sleep, showing that the flowers are at peace. It paints a picture of serenity instead of being caught up in worldly possessions and greed. Oliver (2023) contends that man is not moved by the omnipresent God because God created all things, yet man is heedless. The poet says that he rather be a pagan who believes in the divinity of nature than follow a religion that does not eulogise nature. Wordsworth's believes in the magical power of nature whereby man is indifferent to it.

Man's love for industrialization has led to the destruction of huge land mass, forest reserves, poaching of animals and animal grazing area. Due to disbelief of God, man has also bargained his religion for material things.

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;

The poet exclaims that "we are out of tune" with the beauty of nature that makes the poet forlorn.

So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

He pleads to nature to allow him stand on this meadow or grassy area and see things that will make him less forlorn-unhappy and less depressed. He rather has a glimpse of Proteus rising from the sea or hears old Triton blow his horn. He goes back to Greek mythology; Proteus was a Greek sea god who could change his form. Triton was also a sea god, son of Poseidon and his messenger by blowing his conch shell horn; he could calm or raise the waves of the sea. The poem ends with a nostalgic feeling of loss by the poet, in a way life has become of "getting and spending". Wordsworths feels dejected in the last stanza that he wishes to find solace in the embrace of nature and witness sights that will make him less forlorn. The poet submits to the tranquil environment that is unspoilt, calling upon man to respect, adore and appreciate it.

Romanticism has not lost its impact with time but will continue to exist so long works of the romantic poets are studied; this will impact on generations to come who will re-interpret the works to find new meaning in relation to problems that arise in society.

Conclusion

This paper examines William Wordsworth's poem *The World Is Too Much with Us* re-interpreted in the 21st century. The poem is a reminder that nature has been tampered with but there is need to embrace, let it grow, and develop our natural habitat. The poem speaks to the inner soul of man to step back, appraise and critically focus on those things that bring us happiness and contentment. To pursue wealth is not a sin nor is industrialization but if it shatters the serene, tranquil environment then man would have lost a great deal after all is won or loss. Nature brings back the humanity in us, nurtures relationship between man and others, and dispenses tension in a world full of greed and corruption. Indeed, *The World Is Too Much With Us* speaks of the remedy in today's conflicting and materialistic society. Man must be reborn to fully understand the relevance of nature whether individually or in groups. Wordsworth's poem is timeless and will be a message that will transcend man and his existence on this earth.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations of the study;

- The preservation of nature should be of priority to individuals and government bodies.
- Romanticism nurtures relationship between man and others.
- Poetry is a means to understand the beauty of nature; by studying it, society will benefit immensely from it.
- Man should not exploit nature by destroying it or by causing havoc to its stability.
- The poem should be studied at all levels to prick the sensibilities of man to live a better life by appreciating nature not by acquiring materialistic things.

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