

Which World Should Be Too Much With Us?

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Those who have had the pleasure to become acquainted with William Wordsworth's work have been blessed by his subtle observations and stirring contemplations through which he takes the seemingly insignificant everyday aspects of life and reveals within them aspects of something naturally divine. Writing in his simple and straightforward fashion, Wordsworth successfully and subversively infiltrates the subconscious of his reader, bringing him or her to a real awareness of what he sees and thus persuading the reader line by line into the same school of thought. In fact, Wordsworth was so good at his art that "two accredited leaders of English criticism in the nineteenth century, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, ranked Wordsworth among the five greatest English poets, his compeers being, in their opinion, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton" (Cooper 119). Among so great a host of poets, whose works have long outlasted their lives and continue to influence the world, he surely was a master of the art, and through it he poured out his soul. To him poetry was the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," and "intense emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 273). Thus, Wordsworth's poetry is more than just artistic statements intended to provoke contemplation. His poetry is his own contemplation overflowing into statements which although meek, demand, through their content, his audience's consideration.

Consequently, in Wordsworth's sonnet "The World is Too Much with Us," his audience finds a personal and authentic contemplation from Wordsworth's soul, rather than a fictitious work; a stirring artistic statement concerning the world from his day till now, and a gripping

piece of art by which Wordsworth reasons with his readers and convincingly argues that they become catalysts within their world. In this sonnet Wordsworth deals with the issue of the glorious blessings of nature versus the wasteful trappings of society. For example, the first four lines indicate, “we [mankind] have given our hearts away” and “we see little in nature that is ours,” thus we fail to have enough of the natural world and instead we have the industrial world “too much with us.” In fact, we have embraced the civilized world so much that now all we experience is “getting and spending” (Wordsworth 482). Consequently, we miss out on the joys of nature which should thrill our souls and make life worth living. After all, what is the result of the “giving and the spending” but the endless cycle of emptiness and attainment of lifeless material possessions? As a result, we not only lose the joy because nature “moves us not;” we also lose our very hearts. In Wordsworth’s words, “we have given our hearts away,” and we are “out of tune” with the very nature of life (lines 4,8). Nature itself being our mother, we should be deeply and essentially in tune with her, especially in contrast with the self-imposed hustle and bustle of society with which we are apparently “in tune.” For, we have come from her womb, not society’s, and we will return to her womb, not society’s, when our lives are spent. Thus, such a state of existence at the very least should alarm us if not completely vex our souls. In fact, Wordsworth goes on to emphatically state:

Great God! I’d rather be,
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
have glimpses that would make me less forlorn; (9-12)

In other words,

Wordsworth is saying, presumably, that superstition is preferable to worldliness or apathy if it preserves the life of the imagination and our sense of nature as a living presence with purpose akin to our own. The poet is not commending paganism at the expense of Christianity, but contrasting its “poetry” with the deadly materialism of modern living which is out of tune with nature’s “powers” and nullifies our own. (Hill 26)

Ironically, Wordsworth’s chosen title adds emphasis to his point because it focuses on the paradox of the word *world* which is capable of referring to either society or the natural world. Therefore, it evokes contemplation concerning the question: which world is too much with us? Obviously, Wordsworth’s speaker believes the world that “is too much with us” is not the natural world which we should revere, but rather the new industrialized society in which we live. Yet, the title focuses on the deeper issue with which the speaker is concerned: that nature “is [not] too much with us.” Thereby, Wordsworth focuses his reader’s concentration on the nature within our souls, which is naturally “much with us” and should be, the something essential to our lives which we cannot fully comprehend or explain but only experience. Without nature in our souls, we are simply “spent” and return to dust having lived without the hearts God and nature gave us. Like nurturing parents, God and Nature long for our souls to resound with the characteristics each has passed on to us. Thus, with our wills we should embrace nature and not trade it in for a false alternative which lacks the genius which our human nature displays: a nature that is perfectly blended of both our divine father’s and our organic mother’s eternal essence.

Now concerning the other trimmings Wordsworth uses to frame this prophetic piece, his diction is so well chosen for the topic it brings the reader to understand his experience of one

who has come to the realization that his societal life is draining him of the life within him. For example, in line two Wordsworth illustrates this idea specifically stating, "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Of what powers does he speak? The next two lines reveal them: "Little we see in Nature that is ours;/ we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (3-4). Therefore, the powers "we lay waste" are the inherent faculties through which we experience life: our heart, our soul, and our imagination. Furthermore, it is abundantly clear through the poem's tone that Wordsworth's use of the term heart is meant to refer to more than just the organ which keeps the blood flowing. It is meant in the old sense of the word which is interchangeable with the term soul: the soul being the mysterious element of the human composition consisting of the mind, will, and emotions. Thus, Wordsworth's speaker's words bear down upon our consciences all the more, for he is not speaking of just throwing away some whimsical sentimentality or fancy of nature, but rather he speaks of discarding that which distinguishes us as unique in all of God's creation.

Similarly, the choice of a Petrarchan style sonnet rather than one of Wordsworth's native English style sonnets lends itself nicely to the lofty contemplation with which his piece is concerned. For example, in the Petrarchan style, the first and last line of each quatrain in the octave before the turn has an emphasis in the poem's rhythm which is underlined by the pauses which the lines in between encourage. As a result, his readers are coerced into contemplating the speaker's view through their natural inclination to take in the lines which sound the same together and thereby pause and relate the lines to one another. Moreover, its rhyme scheme adds to the continuous re-emphasizing the poem conveys through its continuous reiteration of natural rhyme: soon, boon, moon, and tune as well as outworn, forlorn, and horn.

Likewise, the speaker's words create vivid, living imagery which set our imaginations to work and create in us the same heartbreak the speaker feels. The chosen diction appeals to most of our senses: audible, visual, and tactile making it real to the reader in each and every moment he or she takes it in. For example, Wordsworth arouses the senses of the reader allowing him or her to hear the actual "winds that will be howling at all hours," and ". . . old Triton[s] blow[ing] his wreathed horn" (6,14). Simultaneously, the reader is enticed to visualize "[a] Sea that bares her bosom to the moon" and "[a] pleasant lea," (5,11). Likewise, the reader is brought to have a sense of feeling such winds howl and brush his or her skin while feeling the grass of such a lea between their toes.

Thus, through both his style and his words, Wordsworth brings the speaker's point to bear upon our minds with a haunting clarity. Through the echoing tone which causes his readers to rethink their lives, Wordsworth subtly, yet gravely, states that without nature and the imagination which accompanies it our lives are naught but empty and worthless being void of the "living" aspects of life which make it worth living. Why does he do this? Why write such a piece? He knows the deeper beauty of Nature which invigorates his soul with the joys and efficacy of Nature and he sees the senseless waste which the demanding societal "city" life inevitably leads to. Moreover, he realizes the detriment which that life poses to his beloved nature, and it vexes his soul. Therefore, if his readers are not touched by his proclamation of such a dire situation, it can only be because their hearts have been hardened by their fast paced modern lives which have all but killed them in the pursuit of material wealth. Meanwhile, such readers are also dying from a lack of nurture which Mother Nature affords. So, which world should be much with us: the material city life of possession, position, and prestige, or the

nurturing nature which is connected with our souls? Wordsworth's speaker has made up his mind. Have we?

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