

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 7 July 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

## Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

---

### Abstract

Man's andocentric aspiration and 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. Gross materialism has forced it upon each and every human being it to strive to save our environment. It has become the urgency of our age to protect our biosphere, its diversity and its autonomy. Natural disasters such as tsunami, earthquakes, volcano, hurricane, pandemic, cosmic and uv radiation, and the collision of comets have enforced the human society to think about the significance of the preservation of nature for human survival. The consequences of lack of respect for nature are greatly disastrous; it has brought calamities such as global warming, deforestation, extinction of species, reduction in ground water, desertification, destruction of the ozone layers and many others. It has forced us to realize that healthy and respectful attitude towards nature is necessary. These disasters resulting from lack of stewardship of natural resources have warned us that any more disrespect shown against nature will leave us wailing, and lamenting.

Now the world could expect three to five major disasters a year, each of which might kill more than fifty thousand people. These results have forced us to think about nature

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth

seriously, and to make it an integral part of academic domains. Eco-criticism is an emerging field that has been gaining importance rapidly. It is the study of man's relationship with his environment. This research paper presents the introduction of Ecology along with the ecological crisis and the solutions that are suggested in Wordsworth's poem "The World is Too Much With Us."

**Key words:** Wordsworth, Materialism, Ecology, Nature, The world is too much with us.

## **Introduction**

Wordsworth was one of several "romantic" poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He does not approve of the sordid pursuits of life. He wants human beings to keep away from the life of vain materialism. This sort of life is neither useful to the individual nor good for the society. In his sonnet "The World is Too Much with us" the poet expresses his resentment against the life of materialism. Wordsworth is lamenting about society's need and greed for money and things. He was not the first poet or author to lament man's disrespect for nature. William Wordsworth the great lover of nature opposes gross materialism in this poem. The industrial age was bringing in steam locomotives, machines and factories and Wordsworth's world was facing the crisis of Industrial revolution. He felt that man was being brought up on a destructive lifestyle that eventually leads him to the harmful situations in life. The poet's world was facing the evil effects of the Industrial Revolution where he saw the danger of industries. He saw the harshness of the Industrial Age, and he predicts that man will destroy nature. Two centuries later, today, Wordsworth's predictions have been proved true. Man's materialistic ambitions born of the Industrial Revolution are translated into today's greed and the growing ignorance of the finite realities of nature.

Increasing materialistic tendency is the cause of Environmental degradation that has compelled every citizen of this world to begin thinking about this peril.

## **1. Materialism**

The philosophy of materialism holds that the only thing that exists is matter; that all things are composed of material and all phenomena (including consciousness) are the result of material interactions. In other words, matter is the only substance. As a theory, materialism is a form of physicalism and belongs to the class of monist ontology. As such, it is different from ontological theories based on dualism or pluralism. For singular explanations of the phenomenal reality, materialism would be in contrast to idealism and to spiritualism. The literal meaning of "materialism" is the belief that "money, possession and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values" while the philosophical meaning is "the belief that only material things exist". Just as Thomas Carlyle says, "The truth is, men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe and hope, and work only in the visible. ... Only the material, the immediate practical, not the divine and

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth

spiritual, is important to us. The infinite, absolute character of virtue has passed into a finite, conditional one; it is no longer a worship of the beautiful and good; but a calculation of the profitable.” (Thomas Carlyle, *Signs of the Times*, 1829)

In today’s world of modernization and technology, man values only money and forgets about the invisible that is divine. Modern man remains busy in calculating profit only, instead of worshiping the beautiful and good things in life, nature being one of those things.

### **1.1 Defining Matter**

The nature and definition of matter - like other key concepts in science and philosophy - have occasioned much debate. Is there a single kind of matter of which everything is made of, or multiple kinds? Is matter a continuous substance capable of expressing multiple forms of hylomorphism or a number of discrete, unchanging constituents atomism. According to substance theory it has intrinsic properties, or is it lacking then primary material?

One challenge to the traditional concept of matter as tangible "stuff" came from the field of physics in the 19th century. The theory of Relativity shows that matter and energy (including the spatially distributed energy of fields) are interchangeable. This enables the ontological view that energy is primary material and matter is one of its forms. On the other hand, the Standard Model of Particle physics uses a new theory known as quantum field theory to describe all interactions. On this view it could be said that fields are *prima materia* and the energy is a property of the field.

### **1.2 History of Materialism**

According to Karl Jaspers, development of materialism possibly independently happened in several geographically separated regions of Eurasia during the Axial age (approximately 800 to 200 BC). Pierre Gassendi, later on, represented the materialist tradition, in opposition to Descartes. These thinkers are materialists. Jean Meslier, Julien Offroy Paul-Henri Thiry Baron d’Holbach and other French Enlightenment thinkers along with John “walking Stewart”, all of them insisted that all matter is endowed with a moral dimension. This left a deep impression on the mind of Wordsworth.

Wordsworth felt the perils of increasing industrial revolution and strongly opposed the tendency of materialism.

## **2. Ecology**

Ecology is a holistic science, concerned in the largest sense with the relationship between living beings and their environment. In a word it is the study of all those complex interrelations whether it is organic or inorganic.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth

## **2.1 Definition of Ecology**

Ecology is the study of the relationships of organisms to their physical environment and to one another. The study of an individual organism or a single species is termed autecology; the study of groups of organisms is called synecology. Ecology is also often defined as the science of the interrelations of organisms and the science of the relations between organisms and their environment. Modern ecology also studies man's interaction with the biosphere.

## **2.2 Historical Background**

The term "Ecology" was coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel, a German philosopher and scientist, and entered English vocabulary only seven years later. The intention of Haeckel was to invite a diverse assortment of scholars and activist to collect the issues concerned with ecology and environment. By studying the representation of the physical world in literary text, it became clear that the modern idea of nature and concern for the non-human world has its long deep roots in British and American romantic literature.

Speaking for non- human world was a favorite concern that was set-off as a movement some hundred years later in the United States for a close investigation of ecological concern in nature writing.

## **2.3 Ecosystem**

Biosphere means—the total expanse of water, land, and atmosphere that is able to sustain life—the basic ecological unit is the ecosystem. An ecosystem may be as small as a tidal pool or a rotting log or as large as an ocean or a continent-spanning forest. Each ecosystem consists of a community of plants and animals and other living organisms. In an environment that supplies them with raw materials for life, i.e., chemical elements and water, the ecosystem is delimited by the climate, altitude, water and soil characteristics, and other physical conditions of the environment. Man works in partnership with his environment. It becomes a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship in many poems of Wordsworth.

Bate Jonathan writes, "The 'Romantic Ecology' reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things; it proclaims that there is 'one life' without us and abroad, that the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at our peril. In sharp contrast to the so called 'Romantic Ideology', the Romantic Ecology has nothing to do with flight from the material world, from history and society. It is in fact an attempt to enable mankind the better to live in the material world by entering into harmony with the environment." (p. 40).

## **3. Ecological Analysis of Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us"**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth

Man's greed and materialistic attitude towards nature has not changed since 19<sup>th</sup> century, as seen in William Wordsworth's poem "The World Is Too Much with Us" (1807). Human will and culture of society of 'getting and spending' in pursuit of material wealth and comfort in Wordsworth's world of 19th century rural England, was much the same as the culture in today's 21st century world. The only difference is that nature from which man extracts resources is now fully exploited and badly depleted. Wordsworth in his poem "The World is too much with us" is showing his resentment against the life of materialism. He warns his countrymen about the evils of wasteful lives that take and never give. He starts his poem by saying,

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; (1-3)

So, the natural world has changed but people's mindset, attitude and behavior have not. Man's unnecessary, profligate, and irresponsible consumption has been continually depleting the finite resources of nature. Wordsworth accuses the modern age of having lost its precious connection to nature and everything that can bring meaning to this potentially constructive relationship:

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon (4).

People are simply engrossed in the material value of things and possessions while they forget the peaceful, romance of Nature:

The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon; (5).

Man has exploited nature as a commodity. Nature, in all its innocence and purity, is helpless in the face of man's destruction of it, and no meaning can be found any more in man's materialistic lifestyle. Recognize the harmony of life that is lost, and we can see good and pure things do not move man's heart anymore:

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.—Great God! (8-9).

The last lines of the poem point to Wordsworth's observations that if he had the same faith in the ancient and pagan gods, and saw the world based on a purer vision, that faith might make him less depressed with how the world has turned out to be. To us there is nothing wonderful or mysterious about the natural world, but ancients who were pagans created a colorful mythology out of their awe of Nature. That ancient belief can make him see the world in a different light, far purer and cleaner than the vision of man in the Industrial Age because pagans worshipped nature and held it in awe and reverence.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth

Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn. (12-14)

In the sonnet "The World Is Too Much with Us" the poet contrasts Nature with the world of materialism and comments how insensitive we are to the richness of Nature that we may be forfeiting our souls. The title and the first line, "The World is Too Much with us", express Wordsworth's belief that his contemporaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were too absorbed in material things. The material world, he suggests, is always foremost in our minds. In the sonnet, Wordsworth states that human nature is preoccupied with "getting and spending," to which pursuits we have "given our hearts." Further, "we are out of tune" with nature; we do not appreciate the beautiful sea, which "bares her bosom to the moon," or the howling winds that "are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers." In short, natural aesthetics "moves us not." In the six subsequent lines, Wordsworth affirms that he would prefer to be "A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" than to be "out of tune" with nature. Wordsworth alludes to nature's splendor that the pagans saw and held in awe when he talks about "Proteus rising from the sea". These visions, Wordsworth explains to the reader, "would make me less forlorn." William Wordsworth's poem is a statement about conflict between nature and humanity. The symbolism in his poem gives the reader a sense of the deep conviction and strong feelings that moved Wordsworth.

#### 4. Conclusion

In today's world of modernization and globalization while we are facing a lot of ecological problems, it is the hour's need to think crucially on this matter. Modern technology and gross materialism have changed our attitudes to life to the crux of our hearts and man has become bereft of spiritual powers as well as nature's love. We do not know how to cherish this planet of which we are a part. If we have to dwell on the earth then we must save the earth. Man is so much engrossed in selfish living, and materialism that only works such as William Wordsworth's poem can open the eyes of human beings and help save the earth from the ecological crisis. It is not only inevitable for saving the world from ecological degradation, but also for our survival. We can do it only by getting away from the tendency of materialism, to start cherishing, conserving and enjoying nature so as to receive all the peace and refuge from emotional trouble only nature could give man. Wordsworth had been terribly depressed by the gruesome manner in which the French Revolution (which he had whole-heartedly supported) ended, and he turned to nature, and found some solace in her beauty and majesty.

=====

#### References

Burrow, Charles Kennet. (1989). *Wordsworth's Poetical Works*. Jaipur: Arihant publishers.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth

Garrard, Greg. (2007). *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge.

Glotefelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm (eds). (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader : Landmarks in literary Ecology*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press.

Jonathan, Bate (1991). *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge.

----- (2000). *The Song of The Earth*. London: Picador.

Nicholsen, Shierry Weber. (2003). *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: the unspoken dimensions of environmental concern*. London, England: MIT Press.

Orlemans, O. (2002). *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*. Toronto : University of Toronto Press.

Pepper, David (1996). *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Shukla, Anu & Dwivedi, Rini. (2009) *Ecoaesthetic and Ecocritical Probing*s. New Delhi: Sarup Publishers.

Wordsworth, W. 1949. *The Poetical Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wordsworth, William. (1967). *Selected Poetry and Prose*. (ed) W.M. Merchant. London: Rupert Hart Devis.

Wright, David. (ed.) 1968. The Penguin Book of English Romantic Verse. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth.

=====

Mrs. Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate  
Assistant Professor of English  
Swami Vivekanand Govt. P.G. College  
Neemuch (M.P) 458441  
Madhya Pradesh  
India  
[ashajain1968@gmail.com](mailto:ashajain1968@gmail.com)

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Asha Jain, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

Materialism and Ecological Views of Wordsworth