

MODULE- IV

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WILLIAM WORDSWORTH : THE *IMMORTALITY ODE* AND *TINTERN*

ABBEY – A GROWTH OF POET’S MIND

CONTENT STRUCTURE

- 1.1 : AUTHOR’S INTRODUCTION
- 1.2 : INTRODUCTION OF THE POEMS
- 1.3 : POET’S IDEA OF PHILOSOPHICAL POEM
- 1.4 : COMPARE AND CONTRAST OF THE TWO POEMS
- 1.5 : CONCLUSION
- 1.6 : BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES
- 1.7 : QUESTIONAIRE
- 1.1 : AUTHOR’S INTRODUCTION**

William Wordsworth , an icon of Romantic era, was born on 7th April 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumberland in Lake District and was the second of five children to John Wordsworth and Ann Cookson. His father being the legal representative of James Lowther , 1st Earl of Lonsdale, managed to stay in a huge mansion in a small town encouraged Wordsworth to read and memorise large portions of verse from the works of Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser. He met Mary Hutchinson in a school for the children of upper classes in Penrith and later married her. Wordsworth and Dorothy, his younger sister , stayed apart from each other for nine long years due to their education after the death of their mother in 1778. In 1787 Wordsworth came up with his debut sonnet in *The European Magazine* and received his BA degree in the year 1791. In November 1791, Wordsworth visited Revolutionary France and became enchanted with the Republican movement. In 1795 he met Coleridge, his comrade and companion in Somerset and the most important and famous work of Romantic era was composed in 1798 , called Lyrical Ballads. One of Wordsworth's most famous poems, "Tintern Abbey", was published in this collection, along with Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". After his only play The

Borderers, in extreme pressure and loneliness he started his autobiographical poem , later titled "The Prelude" in 1798-99. Wordsworth married his childhood friend Mary Hutchinson in 1802. Wordsworth's philosophical allegiances as articulated in "The Prelude" and in such shorter works as "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" have been a source of critical debate. It was long supposed that Wordsworth relied chiefly on Coleridge for philosophical guidance, but more recently scholars have suggested that Wordsworth's ideas may have been formed years before he and Coleridge became friends in the mid-1790s. In 1838, Wordsworth received an honorary doctorate in Civil Law from the University of Durham and the following year he was awarded the same honorary degree by the University of Oxford, when John Keble praised him as the "poet of humanity", praise greatly appreciated by Wordsworth. Wordsworth left for heavenly abode on 23rd April 1850 at his home at Rydal Mount.

1.2 : INTRODUCTION OF THE POEMS

Wordsworth had rejected the 18th century ideal of rationalism and the teaching of William Godwin (*Political Justice*), as far back as the date of the composition of his play *The Borderers* (1795). Then he had been lured by Hartley's belief in the growth of the moral sense out of the decay of the bodily senses, and their experiences. Of course there was always the primary and essential differences between the two men , that while Hartley was a philosopher and a psychologist ;(and not even a " poetic philosopher", having believed that the poetry was the rattle of the nature), and Wordsworth was a philosophic poet. The vacation of poet and his own experiences compelled Wordsworth to go still further and to free himself from the world of senses. Even in *Tintern Abbey* , where one sees the poet reveling in the world of the eye and the ear, in the pluralistic manifestations of Nature, the poet had hinted at certain deeper significances , although only vaguely:

While with an eye met quiet by the power
Of harmony , and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

His faith in the Restoration and beneficial roll of the Nature had been timed and warning and he often admitted his inability to figure out ' this unintelligible world.' Nature had taught him how to love and understand his fellowman, particularly the personages of his various lyrics and longer poems, but it has still left a longing for greater understanding and occasional vacillations between doubt , and faith. However nature had also made him realize his own powers, particularly the power of the poetic imagination. Particularly the second and the more important point that the eight year interval between *Tintern Abbey* and *Immortality Ode* , was the imaginative and the inner road to knowledge , in place of that through the senses. It was however in Wordsworth's case, much more than a merely epistemological question having

ramifications that branched out to cover such other related issues as philosophy, attitude, Nature and eschatology. Incidentally this also happens to be approximately, the conclusions of the neo-Platonic and Wordsworth's mentor and life-long companion, Coleridge. Plato believed in Mimesis beyond the visible world and hence lying beyond sense perceptions. In other words, the temporal and visible world hides from one's consciousness, the knowledge of perfection. Of the "Veil" (which is incidentally one of Plato's favourite images, describing the separation of the two worlds), separating these two worlds, confusion would give place to order, ugliness to beauty, imperfection to perfection, and most importantly for Wordsworth the "many" could be seen as "one". The Platonic philosophers know instinctively when he has a vision of the truth, although he may never be able to convince the common herd of humanity that he has been able to transcend their limited and materialistic vision. *Tintern Abbey* had hinted at this elitist seclusion but *Immortality Ode* expands upon this idea until the poet is rendered as a sacred being with a halo round his head and the deity of Nature is replaced by that of the poetic imagination.

1.3 : POET'S IDEA OF PHILOSOPHICAL POEM

Imagination and its external manifestation or articulated form, poetry, now comes to the poet's aid. It is only through an exercise of the poetic imagination that he can exorcise the sense of irreparable loss haunting him so relentlessly:

A timely utterance gave that thought relief

Gelling down earnestly to the task of restoring his equanimity, the poet now assumes a more philosophic guise. He seeks to answer his own questions with the help of the Platonic belief in the prenatal existence of the soul. Compared with this stage of heightened awareness, birth, in effect, becomes a process of rendering the soul dormant, and consigning to oblivion, the memories that the soul cherishes of the ideal types and divine forms with which it has been stocked in the life of the soul before birth:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting

The soul that rises with us, our life's star

Hath had elsewhere its setting

And cometh from afar.

The child retains the celestial vision, because of its proximity to the higher realities of the life of the sole memories. However, still persists, though weak, to make childhood the happiest part of mortal existence:

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

The child's progress in the path of maturity is thus a self-destructive process. Life is pictured as a journey taking one away from the sunshine of the 'glorious birth.' The visionary glim of childhood and youth fades 'into the light of common day', with the attainment of manhood. The soul, like the sun rises in all its glory in the East of one's birth, only to set in the West of its re-union with the ideal and the immortal life, that has been its long-deserved goal and cherished habitat.

Mundane existence exercises all its charms to erase the memories of this immortal life of the soul from the mind of the child. Heaven, as in Plato's writings, is pictured as the 'imperial palace' from where it has come. Nature is the foster-mother who tries in every way possible to keep the child happy with present and earthly joys; the 'homely nurse' tries to make her 'foster-child' forget the royal pleasures it was accustomed to in Heaven.

But the child, too, is surprisingly willing to assume the role of an actor who mimes mature actions, to please its parents with its precocity and its imitations of earthly life:

See, at his feet some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral:

But, as David Newsome points out, the 'six years' darling of a 'pygmy-size' is none other than Hartley Coleridge, who had all the makings of the poet in him – an exceptional son of an exceptional father. Although Coleridge made fun of Wordsworth's, both in his *Table Talk*, as well as, his miscellaneous writings, even Coleridge wondered about the genius of his son. In *Immortality Ode* Wordsworth is tracing the growth of the poet from infancy to maturity, as part of the prologue and mimetic programme, the growing boy, and the youth, (who is still Nature's priest), slowly matures into a poet – which is another part that he plays on the stage of life. The imagination is not free of its earthly shackles until maturity, and in infancy, the child is only too eager to imitate his elders:

As if his whole vocation

Where endless imitation.

In *Tintern Abbey* too, age and maturity had provided 'abundant recompense.' As one approaches old age, one comes closer to the other immortality – when the soul around whom the shades of the 'prison-house' have been closed so long, is about to be liberated. In order to resume its immortal life the poet has to swallow and forget his numerous disappointments, and ultimately find consolation in , ' The faith that looks through death' and in the 'philosophical mind.'

1.4 : COMPARE AND CONTRAST OF THE TWO POEMS

The *Immortality Ode* is more philosophical than autobiographical , although in the former poem the first person is used and the term "man" refers not only to the poet, his childhood, his youth and his maturity , but with adaptations and alteration , it applies to the whole of humanity. *Tintern Abbey* is more consciously autobiographical , since from the very little details , as well as the presence of Dorothy, besides there are specific recollections of childhood incidents . The *Immortality Ode* by contrast traces the growth of the poetic mind and imagination, firstly, through the activities, and the prattle of Hartley Coleridge and then in the more mature Wordsworth. However, most of the time Wordsworth seems to be intending one to understand that the statement made in the poem , besides those relating particularly to the growth of the poet can have a more universal application.

Tintern Abbey, because of Dorothy's non-participating presence, becomes a dramatic monologue. However, there is a strong philosophical undercurrent throughout the poem and the poet's attitude to his readers is often consciously didactic.

The concerns of *Tintern Abbey* are mainly mundane and utilitarian; with the help of pantheism , Wordsworth unites the several , apparent disparate stages of human life. Childhood and early life have their own charms and even, maturity and age are not exactly or entirely devoid of their peculiar satisfaction. The *Immortality Ode* although philosophical, approaches the theme with a more epistemological attitude. By eschatological , one is to understand references not only to the life after death , but also prenatal powers of perception , as well as, a more universal attitude.

The attitude to Nature in the *Immortality Ode* is somewhat different from which one encounters in the earlier poem (*Tintern Abbey*). In *Immortality Ode* it seems that the poetic imagination endows Nature with its benevolence its animation , its ability to heal and console its power and its willingness to guide and advise human being. In *Tintern Abbey* the reaction to Nature is more complicated and there are three stages of man's changing attitude to it; firstly, the child is endlessly thrilled by Nature, and seems to pierce through the external manifestations of Nature; secondly, in youth man takes delight, or, revels in instinctive and

unreflective enjoyment of Nature; thirdly, in the more mature stage, man arrives at the teleological justification to become both evident and possible. The Immortality Ode has also three maturing stages.

1.5 : CONCLUSION

Tintern Abbey and *Immortality Ode* are poems of growth , that is, to borrow a phrase from the criticism of fiction , both are in the nature of Bildungsroman, that is, a novel of education or growth . Both poems approach the question of growth and loss it invariably entails, but with slightly different resolutions. *Tintern Abbey* seems to end on a greater note of doubts and misgivings than *Immortality Ode*. In both poems , Wordsworth is indecisive , however, the situation in the Immortality Ode is different , because Dorothy is dead and Wordsworth has only himself to commune with. While *Tintern Abbey* is a dramatic monologue, the *Immortality Ode* is merely a monologue.

1.6 : BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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1.7 : QUESTIONNAIRE

1. In later stanzas of William Wordsworth's "Ode: On Intimations of Immortality," how does nature wholly or partially resolve the conflict between earthly and heavenly existence?
2. What is the meaning of childhood, pre-existence, and memory in William Wordsworth's poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" and "Tintern Abbey"?
3. How is childhood central to Wordsworth's conception of self in "Tintern Abbey", and how is that self affected by the aging process?