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Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*: Conveying Experience Through Nature

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Abstract :

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" takes on an abundance of ideas regarding nature's ability to preserve one's memories as well as past and present perceptions. Wordsworth conveys his experiences with nature to readers through his poem using vibrant imagery, a narrative-like structure and abstract metaphors. A further look into the poem will provide support for the pervasive affect of Wordsworth's written work to evoke sentiments from readers. "Tintern Abbey," by William Wordsworth, is a poem that concentrates on a single moment in a natural environment yet extracts a multitude of sensations and perceptions that are able to impact the minds of readers across centuries. As readers, we obtain a first person perspective of the abbey's ruins and the way that Wordsworth interprets the environment's change in appearance since he last visited the abbey five years prior.

Published in the 1798 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" has been a mode of conveying feelings through scenes of serene natural imagery. Detailed depictions of the environment present the reader with an illustration of the abbey that seems to leap off of the page and be recreated within the mind's eye. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" utilizes detailed imagery,

a narrative-like form, and abstract metaphors in order to transform a subjective, personal experience into a relatable interaction with the natural world. The use of detailed imagery within “Tintern Abbey” provides a sturdy ground for readers to stand upon in order to effectively comprehend the subtle sentiments evoked from Wordsworth’s environment. The articulation of the environment Wordsworth finds himself in is a primary method of communication his ideas to readers. These research article will discuss and Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey Conveying Experience Through Nature.

Keywords : Wordsworth, Poetry, Nature, Tintern Abbey and English Romantic Poetry.

Introduction :

William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770, in Cookermouth, Cumberland, England. He was a major English Romantic poet who, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication Lyrical Ballads (1798). Wordsworth’s magnum opus is generally considered to be The Prelude, a semi-autobiographical poem of his early years that he revised and expanded a number of times. It was posthumously titled and published by his wife in the year of his death, before which it was generally known as “the poem to Coleridge”. The collection, which contained Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” introduced Romanticism to English poetry. Wordsworth also showed his affinity for nature with the famous poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” He became England’s poet laureate in 1843, a role he held until his death in 1850.

Wordsworth would be unable to reveal the enhanced ability to look inward at his thoughts and emotions without the detail and precise illustrations of the landscape within which he is situated. His intent is to draw the audience closer to his own perceptions by recreating the scene in their minds. The following lines from the poem reaffirm the poet’s substantial attention to detailed imagery,

*Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,*

*Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees. (Wordsworth, 15-19)*

The articulation of the hedge-rows, the color of the forest floor and smoke that drifts upwards from the trees has a silencing and peaceful effect on the mind. Encapsulated within the vivid portrayal of the scene is a concentration on the picturesque beauty of the environment. The senses are amplified by these precise illustrations such as the lucid imagery of “pastoral farms” surrounded by a field of green, which gives way to a powerful sense of sight and a type of peaceful comfort in nature. This affect occurs despite the lack of knowledge the reader might have of the physical setting. Silence is an important aspect of the environment that Wordsworth notes within the lines above. The silence signifies the absence of interaction with the environment beyond what the eyes sense and what the mind interprets. The action takes place within Wordsworth’s imagination as he inhales the abundance of elegance that is emitted from the organic setting.

The line prior to his description of the scene begins, “Once again I see.” This affirmation of understanding is supported in the lines to follow where it is clear that the environment allows him to once again be moved by the beauty he is able to extract from the quiet allure of nature.

The idea of keeping one’s attention within a present moment is similar to what Wordsworth experiences in returning to the abbey. He loses the ability to perceive the abbey in the way that he did in the past, allowing him to only manipulate his present perceptions of the environment and imagine future comforts,

*And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. (Wordsworth, 59-66)*

These “half-extinguished thoughts” are the fading memories of his past visit to Tintern Abbey, which he reveals he is sad to let go of. This “sad perplexity” is comforted by his ability to revive prior senses of pleasure in the environment. From this point he moves forward suggesting that if he is capable of redesigning the “pleasing thoughts” he once felt, there is hope to do so in the future. This recognition of present purpose provides nourishment necessary for thriving in the future.

The long stanzas within the poem draw the reader’s attention away from prior stanzas and relay that progressing forward is more crucial in order to derive meaning. Just as Wordsworth extracts a multitude of sensory perception and awareness from a single moment, he beckons readers to invest themselves into the process of his interpretation. Realizing the forward movement of Wordsworth’s thoughts and reactions allows the reader to glimpse a moment of reflection where the current expressions of ideas builds upon prior descriptions and allows a deeper understanding the farther one reads down the page.

These stanza’s therefore seem to represent different moments and stages in Wordsworth’s interpretation, each one tackling a new concept that grows out of ideas from the prior stanza.

The natural world serves as a tool for Wordsworth to comprehend beauty and its ability to impact the human senses. David Miall discusses the importance of the environment and the self-reflection that is gained from the admiration of natural beauty.

In the following lines Miall recognizes the importance of nature in the transmission of feeling to a reader, “The forms of landscape that constitute the scene of the poem make it powerfully iconic, a vehicle for self-understanding that Wordsworth appears to find unique” (Miall, 3). Miall recognizes the influence of the natural setting within “Tintern Abbey” and how it is used in order to convey the “self-understanding” that Wordsworth gains from reminiscing over the abbey’s ruins.

This self-understanding represents Wordsworth’s ability to understand the change in his perceptions of the environment. This self-understanding is also meant to grant Wordsworth his “unique” interpretation of memory as well as past and present sensations he receives from the beauty of the landscape.

Imagery composes the tone of peaceful grandeur, yet it is the accompaniment of Wordsworth's subjective mind that initiates the newfound experience gained from revisiting the environment. In an article entitled "The Contrarieties: Wordsworth's Dualistic Imagery," Charles Smith explains how the permanent aesthetic of the scene is given meaning from the mutability of change within Wordsworth's mind. Smith notes, "This situation is fraught with implications of Permanence and Mutability. The scene itself has changed little or not at all and forms the underlying principle of Permanence. The poet, however, has changed a great deal (Mutability)" (Smith, 1184).

Imagery paired with interpretation becomes an aspect of crucial importance in order for Wordsworth to maintain the connection between what he witnesses and his inner feelings and emotions. This permanence in nature that Smith recognizes contributes to the substantial change that Wordsworth experiences. This change constitutes a close examination of his new and refreshed analysis of nature's emotion evoking qualities.

The way Wordsworth's mind adapts to his own personal growth in character is emphasized in his ability to create an original interpretation of the setting despite its consistency in appearance. Through physical depictions of the images Wordsworth sees, he is able to explain the power of an abstract measurement of life, time. It is essential for Wordsworth to illustrate the scene so that the impact of five years past provides the reader with the way the mind is altered through time and perceptions can be changed as one enters new stages of their life. The abstract nature of time is also realized as a major factor contributing to the growth and adaptation of one's imagination as their physical form changes but nature remains relatively preserved.

Anna Foca, author of "Let me be the calm you seek: Imagination as (Safe) house in Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey," explains how Wordsworth's reliance on creativity allows him to fabricate an emotional comfort that subdues any fear or anxiety that is inherent in one's life. The progression of time initiates emotions of fear or lack of control, which is apparent as people transition into different stages of their lives.

Adaptability is the key necessary in order to overcome the initial discomfort that arises from an alteration in one's life. Foca concentrates on the contrast Wordsworth presents between his experience five year prior to his current experience at Tintern Abbey and how his change in perception allows him to find peace of mind. Foca states, "the enabling power of this act of imagination...demonstrate for the reader how 'Tintern Abbey' becomes an embodiment of the theory which it explicates, the theory that imagination is an adequate remedy to suffering" (Foca).

Throughout one's life challenges will be presented that momentarily stunt the progress of an individual. These hurdles can be overcome by the imagination's ability to fabricate an existence that realizes beauty as a primary quality of life and dismisses fear of the unknown, replacing it with hope. Tintern Abbey's appearance changes very little, yet Wordsworth's growth creates a sense of physical transformation. Foca places importance on the contrast of Wordsworth's imagination from the past to present in order to understand the ability to modify one's perceptions and derive comfort from the functioning of the imagination. Wordsworth's depictions of the environment contribute more to comprehending the reality of minor physical change and emphasizing great emotional adaptation.

"Tintern Abbey's" clear organization of ideas within the poem's stanzas, gives readers the impression of forward movement, bearing similarities to the structure of a story. Wordsworth makes a clear concerted effort to divide the poem into stanzas in order to show a clear cause and effect view of the way he interprets his environment. Each section of the poem relies on the stanza before in order to clearly illustrate progress and the conscious process of fabricating meaning from a mere perception of the natural world.

Brian McHale focuses on the breaks between stanzas and they way that they provide relief for the reader to input their own interpretations of the text before moving onto a new section. McHale suggests that the reader's ability to comprehend is encouraged through these spaces in the text, "It is where meaning-making is interrupted or *stalls out*, where the text breaks off and a gap (even if only an infinitesimal one) opens up, that the reader's meaning-making apparatus must *gear up* to bridge the gap and heal the breech" (McHale, 16). Wordsworth's long poetic narrative in "Tintern Abbey" seemingly has very little breaks or cuts, apart from the transition between stanzas.

Growth through expression of thought is conveyed through these stanza breaks and ultimately brings the reader to what John Nabholz considers the “final movement” of the poem. Nabholz highlights the human interaction within the work as a pivotal moment that goes beyond a love of nature rooted merely on dependence or identity, and contributes to significant self-actualization, “it describes the mind no longer fulfilling primarily in various degrees of relationship with nature, but in reciprocity with another human being, and doing what nature herself cannot do-defeating mortal limitations by the power of memory” (Nabholz, 229).

While nature is shown to have a substantial influence on the personal growth of an individual, Nabholz argues that interaction with others produces further meaning and understanding. These breaks, previously mentioned above, are an example of the interaction Wordsworth has with his readers, or more accurately, the interaction readers have with him.

These gaps that are used to break up the long lines and stanzas within the poem give the reader ample time to reflect on images or emotions that Wordsworth may have evoked. These brief moments of contemplation supply readers with the comprehension of the previous lines that is necessary to move forward and retain a sense of structure within the narrative structure of the poem. Scott Hess notes the Wordsworth’s intent to dismiss the importance of his physical body in order to clearly articulate his perceptions in an organic way, “In composing scenes from this individual point of view, Wordsworth typically ignores or erases his own body, in the process isolating vision from the other senses and creating a ‘pure’ subjectivity seemingly detached from its environment, its own embodiment, and other forms of relationship” (Hess, 294). This strategy of blocking out one’s own physical inhabitance within an environment allows Wordsworth to solely focus on what he can absorb from his particular point of reference. Wordsworth’s analytical and physical recreation of his experience revisiting Tintern Abbey allows the reader to either familiarize their reading experience to compliment his interpretations or to gather resources to formulate their own understanding the impact of the landscape has on perception.

Wordsworth’s metaphors seem to draw the reader away from objective and factual based interpretations of reality. Nicholas Williams, in his article for

the *Journal of Literature* and *The History of Ideas*, hints at the idea that Wordsworth's view of the landscape is a perception that is created, rather than a sensation that is grounded in objectivity, “[the abbey] has not been a chaos of meaningless raw sensation, as it might be to a blind man on immediately receiving sight, but has been composed in his mind as a meaningful landscape, perceived rather than merely sensed” (Williams).

The metaphors that Wordsworth relies upon suggest a more abstract interaction with his environment, one that transforms his sense of sight into a subjective perception that contributes to his present emotions. This intent by Wordsworth, is a subtlety that is picked up by the reader and questioned. The metaphors within “Tintern Abbey” work towards granting the reader an understanding that is not restricted by the physical limitations of life, but the mental and imaginative creations that contribute the most substantial meaning and purpose.

Finally, it is Wordsworth's dependence on powerful, abstract metaphors that provides an imaginative experience that leaves interpretation open to readers. Wordsworth's insightful metaphors grant significant meaning and purpose to his experience at the abbey, and allow memory to come to the forefront as a way of understanding the present,

*When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies... (Wordsworth, 142-146)*

These lines suggest that memory is the foundation of interpretation. Wordsworth explains that memory inspires the ability to recollect sensations we once felt, but it is the recognition of how these past influences have changed that leads to progress. While the mind matures and “sobers” from past experiences of new discovery, the present self is able to comprehend the mind's progression in its inability to contrast one's own perceptions.

The description of the mind as a “mansion” and a “dwelling-place” for “sweet sounds and harmonies” is a very abstract idea, yet aides in the formation of a concrete feeling that is intrinsic to human nature when an experience is found to be appealing and memorable. Wordsworth depicts the mind as a stationary source capable of retention and recollection, while also able to function as a creator of perspective through what he describes as “healing thoughts.”

The force of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” is undeniably created through the poetic devices of imagery, line and metaphor, which help to convey abstract sensations to readers. These concrete forms of poetic mastery are the building blocks necessary for the transmutation of an individual experience into a form of mass communication where the reader is able to interact and relate to the ideas brought forth by Wordsworth. Poetry is powerful in its innate ability to evolve an objective fact-based experience into a subjective intellectual journey. The interaction between the reader and the poet is another quality the art form is capable of creating.

While Wordsworth communicates his unique experience, readers are able to create a heightened dimension to the poem that spurs interaction through the functioning of one’s imagination. Imagination is the key to revealing truth, which can be discovered through a combination of objective and subjective perception. Wordsworth’s poetry teaches readers that an individual’s unique subjective perception is just as vital as one’s objective perception in order to comprehend truth. Truth is a goal shaped and brought to life by our experiences. It is how we choose to understand those experiences that define who we are as human beings.

Conclusion :

Wordsworth, through the poem, “Tintern Abbey”, has shown a way to establish a better world and a better life, and has taught how a close relationship with Nature could be created in order to give birth to a peaceful and harmonious life in the world. He advises everyone to learn from the past. This is perceptible in the words of Geoffrey H. Hartman (1964) who claims that “Wordsworth’s poetry looks back in order to look forward the better” (p. 29). Thus, the poem, “Tintern Abbey”, is a typical ecocritical work which strives to promote a relationship between Nature and human being. It also indirectly advises every reader to look back and see

how human beings have behaved towards Nature in the past, and what the consequences of their anthropocentric attitude towards Nature are. It also insists on the need to take proper measures to establish harmony with Nature.

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