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‘Instructor’s Name’

‘Subject’

‘The world is too much with us,’ by William Wordsworth

Romanticism was a cultural/intellectual movement that had a profound and long lasting influence on the Europe of eighteenth century. It started during the 1700s and lasted till the mid nineteenth century. It was partly born as a reaction to the industrial revolution and the cultural and social changes brought about by the age of Enlightenment. It emphasized on love of nature and reliance of a man’s natural feelings over rationality. The movement influenced a variety of disciplines such as art, sculpture, literature, drama and music. It was deeply connected with the political and social changes of that era, and echoed people’s fear, hope and expectations. ‘The world is too much with us,’ by William Wordsworth, is a poem which is true to the tenets of romanticism and highlights man’s alienation from nature. The poem delineates the narrowness of modern life and describes how man’s pursuit of material comforts has resulted in disconnection from and ignorance of beauty of the nature.

William Wordsworth was one of the prominent poets of the Romantic era. The French Revolution had a huge impact on the Romantic poets, and most of them, including Wordsworth, initially sympathized with the cause of the revolution but were gradually disillusioned by the bloodshed it resulted in. Wordsworth was fascinated by nature's beauty and power and used nature as a symbol to portray the powers and terrors of the imaginative life in his works.

During his days as a student in Cambridge, he took a walking tour of Europe and the experience had a massive influence on his works and poetic sensibilities. His tour to France gave him a firsthand taste of the revolution and inculcated in him sympathy for life and the language of the common man. Wordsworth adopted the revolution's principle that every man is equal, by simplifying the verses of his poem and presenting it in a common man's language.

His use of simple verses and everyday subject choices were a revolution in itself, since such a style was never attempted before him in poetry, and most poems of the day were aimed towards the educated elite. However buried beneath the simple lyrics are profound themes that reflect on the inner turmoil of the human mind. His poems are often reflective of his own life and his interpretation of the natural world around him.

'The world is too much with us' is one such poem in which Wordsworth, through the use of simple verses, criticizes the materialism found in the European society. He reflects on how, after the first industrial revolution, humanity has been obsessed with making and spending money, and in the process, has ignored the pristine glory of nature. He opines that people are

so concerned with accumulating wealth, that they see nothing worthwhile in nature which they can 'own'.

The industrial revolution was a period characterized by significant technological development in various commercial activities such as agriculture, industrial production and transportation. Mechanical technologies replaced traditional practices, and England and the rest of Europe underwent radical socio-economical changes during this period. The conditions for working class were brutal and the factories gave rise to the modern cities. Many Romantics considered industrialism to be inhumane and unnatural.

Wordsworth was one of those poets who criticized the materialism that was rampant in the society. Through 'The world is too much with us,' he chastises the society for losing its spiritual connection with nature and using this world as a means to achieve economic ends. Written in the form of a traditional Italian sonnet, the poem features fourteen lines with first eight lines offering conflict and the final six lines offering resolution. Wordsworth, however, has manipulated the traditional conventions and has used his own formula instead. Decrying tradition, he undertook to write poetry 'in the language of common men,' and he has made deliberate attempt in this poem to simultaneously employ and modify the traditional form.

The first eight lines (octave) of the poem are devised in the traditional metric and rhyme schemes while the final six lines (sestet) have an abrupt shift in tone and ends with three rhymed couplets. The decision to alter the conventional form is a characteristic of romantic poets, who sought revitalization of poetry and hoped to bring literature into the lives of common

men rather than limit it to the aristocracy. The sonnet form serves as a bridge between the outright traditionalism in which the poet was raised and the liberated imagination of a new age.

As Goodman opines, the poem conveys many romantic themes such as lost intimacy with nature, the importance of feeling and humanity's great but wasted powers. The poem contrasts the magnificence of nature and the dull lifeless industrialized society. The first four lines deal with how mankind in their hurry to increase their wealth has neglected to pay heed to beauty of Mother Nature. 'Getting and Spending' has become a priority and there is no place in our hearts to take in the glory of nature.

“ 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 rest of the octave (lines 5-8) expands on the theme of alienation and explicates how man is not tuned to the natural world. In the ninth line, which is the most important line in most sonnets, the tone of the poem changes and the speaker says he would rather be a pagan who worshipped nature. He hopes that being a pagan perhaps would make him less forlorn about what he sees. After talking about paganism, Wordsworth also touches on Greek mythology by mentioning Proteus, who can take any shape, and Triton, who can calm the sea waves.

In essence, the poem conveys that engagement with material pursuit has led us to miss the charm and cheerfulness of nature. The use of first person (we, ours) is a deliberate ploy by the poet, because though he chastises mankind

for their neglect to appreciate nature, he includes himself in his reprimand. This helps the poet to educate the society about their mistakes without sounding preachy and accusatory.

The tone of the poem is of anger and remorse, whereby the poet feels sad that the hectic modern life is preventing people from stopping to watch the sea or smell a flower. He was saddened by the fact that the industrial revolution has rid people of their free will, forcing them to do things in pursuit of money leaving them little time to appreciate life.

So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,

Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

Though the poem does not explicitly denounce industrial revolution, it epitomizes the romantic critique of the economic materialism. To Wordsworth, the industrialism represented a new form of 'supernaturalism' that clouded the human consciousness with a new mode of thought process. He vehemently opposed this supernaturalism, which conceived of man not as a part of nature but as a machine. While men reverentially succumbed to the wonders of science that gave them immediate gains, they moved away from traditional values and thus, found themselves in a valueless vacuum. Wordsworth communicates this message in the poem, 'The world is too much with us' and calls for man to stop and take heed of the natural world around him and take inspiration from it.

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