

# The Conception of Nature in William Wordsworth's Poetry

Li Dan

Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, 010010, China

**Abstract:** This thesis aims at studying the conception of nature in William Wordsworth's poetry. As one of the remarkable representatives of the romantic period, William Wordsworth played an incomparable significant role in the development of English romantic poetry, and also laid a foundation for its further development. Influenced by social background and personal experience, Wordsworth's natural poetry broke through the shackles of neoclassical literature and gradually formed his own unique conception of nature. Wordsworth's conception of nature was based on the relationship between man and nature, and it emphasized the role of nature in social life and spiritual redemption. By analyzing the relationship between man and nature and constantly seeking the essence of life in nature, the poet attempted to find a way to solve human's problems. Although there have been a lot of researches on Wordsworth and his poetry, there are few studies that systematically analyze the conception of nature in William Wordsworth's poems by integrating his natural poetry into a whole. Based on William Wordsworth's personal experience and social background, this thesis attempts to analyze the causes of the formation of Wordsworth's conception of nature. Through the careful interpretation of Wordsworth's natural poetry, this thesis summarizes his conception of nature and its characteristics. It was found that in William Wordsworth's natural poems, nature was the unity of human nature, rational nature and divine nature, and the combination of the three was the highest attribute sought by human beings. Mastering these characteristics is of great reference values for the study of romantic natural poetry and Wordsworth's conception of nature.

**Keywords:** Romantic poetry, William Wordsworth, Conception of nature

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background Information of the Study

#### 1.1.1. A Brief Introduction to William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the main founders of English romantic poetry. From 1843 to 1850, William Wordsworth was regarded as the "Poet Laureate". This remarkable poet was born in the Lake District, and William Wordsworth always believed that he was fortunate to be born there. Unlike other famous English romantic poets, he enjoyed a short but happy childhood under the tender care of his mother. Unfortunately, his mother died when Wordsworth was only eight years old. Unable to bear the shock of his wife's death, Wordsworth's father passed away five years later. This tragic experience greatly influenced his later works. Of his five siblings, William Wordsworth had the best relationship with his youngest sister Dorothy, and she played a crucial role in his literature creation. After losing their parents, William Wordsworth and his siblings were sent off by their relatives to a grammar school at Hawkshead, and it was there that Wordsworth received an excellent education in art, literature, and mathematics. He showed a keen interest in the creation of poetry.

After graduated from grammar school, Wordsworth attended St. John's College at Cambridge University (from 1787 to 1790). He always returned to his hometown and to nature during his winter and summer vacations. Before graduating from Cambridge, he traveled to several Europe countries in 1790. It was an experience which influenced both on his poetry creation and political sensibilities. The experience of living in French inspired Wordsworth's interests and sympathies for the common people. It was also the source of his latter works. And these works proved to be the most important works that influence Wordsworth's literature career. After taking his Cambridge degree, he returned to France in 1791 and fell in love with a French woman, Annette Vallon. Unfortunately, William Wordsworth had to return to England before his little baby was born. The war between England and France was a trigger for Wordsworth's separation from his daughter and wife. It was not until his precious daughter Caroline was

nine years old that Wordsworth met her for the first time. Those days back in England were the darkest moment of Wordsworth's whole life. Wordsworth lived in London and he had nothing to do but to express his deep sympathy for beggars, children, farmers and other people who lived at the bottom of the society. At the same time, Wordsworth studied numerous literary works of his contemporaries and analyzed their writing methods and styles. This also laid a good literary foundation for him to create his unique conception of nature.

Wordsworth's first two poems, *Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk*, were published in 1793. And after that, he wrote several pieces over the next many years. In 1797, Wordsworth moved to Alfoxden House with his sister Dorothy. While living in there, Wordsworth made the acquaintance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Equally significant thing in his poetic life was his meeting with Coleridge. And their lifelong friendship began at that time. They were the intimate friend and partner, and their partnership not only changed poet's personal life but also altered the path of English poetry. During this period, Wordsworth and Coleridge greatly improved and inspired each other's poetry. In 1798, the two poets joined together to publish the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which was an excellent collection of poems, and it was regarded by many contemporary poets as a declaration of the Romantic Era. After their first time successful collaboration, the second edition was published in 1800.

### ***1.1.2. A Brief Introduction to Romanticism***

Romantic was the indispensable term to describe the period from the late 18th century to the middle of the 19th century. This period was called romantic era, and its literature style was known as romanticism. Different from neoclassical era which had strict restraints, the romantic era moved away from it by advocating personal freedom, imagination and creativity. Since romanticism was the largest literary trend of 18th century, its influence was passed from continent to continent, from generation to generation, and many of its concepts and beliefs were still held in high esteem. The development of English romantic literature has experienced a long span. In 1789, the publication of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's collection work-*Lyrical Ballads* marked the beginning of Romantic Era, and it ended with the remarkable scholar-Walter Scott's death in 1852. The most remarkable literary genre during that period was poetry. Therefore, romantic era was also called poetry era. Romanticists were prefer to reform the content and theory of poetry, and Wordsworth and Coleridge were the pioneers of this field. They advocated the massive revolution of poetry language and theme, which contrasted with the neoclassical poems.

When we mentioned Romantic, there were six poets who immediately spring to our mind. These people believed that they were the "chosen" guy to guide other common people to broke the contemporary situation of poetry. According to the writing styles and themes of their poems, these poets could mainly be divided into two groups.

William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey were regarded as the first generation romantic poets. Since their poems were written when they lived in the English lake districts, they were also called "Lake Poets". In the beginning, they were influenced by French Revolution and then devoted all their passion and energy to the revolution. But after suffering various failures, they chose to live in the lake districts which were far away from "madding crowds". For this reason, it was proper to say that there were many negative elements in their poems, and their attitudes toward the society affairs were indifferent. They preferred to depict nature scenery than social affairs. "Lake Poets" held similar poetics beliefs. They believed that poetry was the holy thing which could purify human spiritual and social morality. Imagination and intuition helped to penetrate deeper into the inner parts of things. They claimed that poetry only could be written under unique inspiration. As a spokesman of nature, William Wordsworth's conception of nature was like a sharp sword, which opened the way for the later development of the conception of nature. He focused on using the common words to illustrate his true feelings toward nature.

Shelley, Byron and Keats were called the second generation of romantic poets. Because they dared to face the reality and criticized the darkness of the society, they were also known as new romanticists. Different from lake poets, the second generation poets were more enthusiastic about social earthly affairs, and they also held the different attitude toward the nature. While Wordsworth and Coleridge often described nature in itself, Shelley regarded the nature as the supreme element of beauty, pleasure and creativity, which was the embodiment of beauty. Keats was the the poet of the sensuous school, and he loved nature because he believed that nature was the combination of human sense of smell, sight, touch and feeling. Human beings were independent individuals who existed outside the nature. They needed to use all their senses to feel and understand nature. For Byron, nature was a way to touch freedom and liberation. In Byron's poems, he thought poem was a projection of the poet's feelings, and it could include

several elements of nature. Nature was like a mirror, which could reflect various emotions and thoughts of human beings. New romanticists took the more positive attitude toward nature landscapes and social affairs. It was also proper to say that new romanticists' writing style was an inheritance from the lake poets, but it also surpassed the writing methods of the lake poets.

Romantics centered on self-knowledge and tried to break the limitations of neoclassicism through personal imagination. Their works were no longer limited to their own experiences, but created new literary works through imagination and impression. Compared with the literature of the neoclassical period, the development of literature in the romantic period pushed English literature to a new climax.

### ***1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study***

The development of English romantic poetry could not be separated from Wordsworth's contribution. William Wordsworth published numerous poems which were strongly characterized by his incredible fascination of nature. Even these poems had been published more than 200 years ago, the ideas and concepts the poet formulated are still shared by many scholars, in particular in current times of progressing globalization, population explosion, and environmental pollution. Based on Wordsworth's passionate, authentic and remarkable way of illustrating nature's beauty and grandeur, this thesis will analyze and interpret selected poems to show Wordsworth's appreciation of nature as well as the characteristics of William Wordsworth's conception of nature. As one of the founders of English romantic poetry, William Wordsworth's works has an important reference function for the study of English romantic literature. In this thesis, there is a study on William Wordsworth's poetry and his conception of nature, which is helpful to grasp the English romantic literature as a whole.

### ***1.3. Structure of the Study***

This thesis is divided into five parts. The first part is a brief introduction of William Wordsworth and romantic literature. Part two is literature review listing some studies at home and abroad. Part three analyzes the historical origin of Wordsworth's conception of nature from the industrial revolution, the French revolution and literature aspects. Part four summarizes the characteristics of Wordsworth's conception of nature. The last part is a conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review**

Nature, as a traditional theme of literary writing, had taken its place for a long time. It prevailed especially during Britain romantic period. William Wordsworth was known as the representative of naturalism. Since his numerous poems took nature as the research object, he was also called "the son of nature" and "the nature poet" by Shelly and other romanticists. His poems described nature's beauty, and he claimed that mankind could gain wisdom and spiritual redemption from it. As one of representative figures of romantic movement, Wordsworth was often chosen by domestic and overseas scholars as the primary target for the study of the romantic movement.

### ***2.1. The Foreign Studies***

For oversea research tendency, foreign scholars mainly researched Wordsworth's works from following paradigms: The first one was political—historical paradigms of criticism, and Meyer Howard Abrams was the representative expert of this aspect. Because it was at the height of the industrial revolution and the political revolution, Wordsworth's poems were not very popular because of his attitude towards social affairs. Many scholars were critical of his work. As an expert of this aspect, Abrams mainly conducted a comprehensive study on Wordsworth. He claimed that Wordsworth's unique conception of nature was affected by the Enlightenment in the 18th century. The second one was feminist paradigms. William Wordsworth spent a happy childhood under the loving care of his mother and he was very close to his sister Dorothy. Since his mother died when he was young, nature was like a mother to take care of him. For Wordsworth, nature was also like an elegant girl who represented his soulmate after he lost his true lover. Thus it could be seen that women played a special role in Wordsworth's life. In most of his poems, nature was represented by female images. Therefore, many oversea poets took this paradigms as the research point to summarize the potential meaning of Wordsworth's poem. The third one was internal paradigms. Many western scholars argued that Wordsworth's conception of nature reflected the humanization and consciousness. They claimed that Wordsworth was a passionate poet and his poems reflected and expressed his own consciousness and emotion. Otherwise, compared with Milton,

Wordsworth's poems brought people inner peace and spiritual redemption. The last one was linguistic paradigms. Some experts choose Wordsworth's poems as an elected object to analyze the linguistic elements among it. It was also a new field to study romanticism poem from unprecedented angle. As the studies about Britain romantic movement getting deeper and broader, there are many new paradigms come into view. More and more scholars begin to explore the new ideas and enlightening findings from romanticists' poems.

## **2.2. The Domestic Studies**

For domestic research tendency, the study of Wordsworth's poems has been going on for a long time. Before 1900, the research which mainly about William Wordsworth and his poems was extremely rare. According to the present statistics and research, it was very common that there was no paper about Wordsworth and his poems for a whole year. Of course, there were also several research papers which were about Wordsworth and his poem on one year. According to the present studies, we found that Wordsworth's poems first appeared in China in March 1914 when East Wu magazine published the translation of Wordsworth's two poems Pauper's Walk and South Tomb of Scotland by Lu Weizhi in the second issue of volume. The official acceptance of Wordsworth by Chinese new literary scholars began with the focus on his poetry theories. In 1919, Hushi put forward in his long poetry On New Poetry-a Major Event in the Past Eight Years that "the literary reform advocated by Wordsworth and others in England was the liberation of poetry"(1935). During the later 19th century, the translation of Wordsworth's poems began to attract the attention of Chinese translators, and many experts in this field such as Xu Zhimo emerged. Even though in the beginning, Wordsworth's negative attitude to social affairs made his poetry unpopular, Wordsworth's earthy language and his unique way of describing nature eventually won praise for him. As time went on, the study of Wordsworth's poems became more and more profound.

Since there were many different opinions upon the conception of nature between western and eastern culture, there were many characteristics of domestic studies. The first characteristic was that the domestic scholars paid more attention to the comparative study. As the representative of Britain romantic poetry, William Wordsworth was used as the main subject of comparative study. Domestic scholars regularly putted William Wordsworth together with famous ancient Chinese naturalists such as Tao Yuanming, Wangwei and Bai Juyi to study the differences and similarities of their conception of nature. Such as in the Editor's Knowledge in the 39th issue of the magazine Xue Heng in 1925. The second aspect was the case study. A lot of scholars prefer to take Wordsworth's selected poems or sentences as an example to analyze its internal meaning. Took Wordsworth's poem I Wounder Lonely as a Cloud as an example, a great number of Chinese poets thought that this poem revealed Wordsworth's personal emotion toward nature and his real feeling-loneliness. The third aspect was ecology aspect, and which was similar to foreign literary. Recently, since more and more natural disasters and ecology pollution problems appeared, ecological protection has attached people's attention again. Ecology paradigms of Wordsworth's poems have become the hottest one. Wordsworth's conception of nature is in line with the development of modern society.

In conclusion, Wordsworth's works have been a popular study object in western and eastern literary history. However, after reviewing many works about this theme, the author found that there are few works that analyze Wordsworth's conception of nature as a whole. Therefore, this thesis will continue to analyze the courses of Wordsworth's conception of nature from historical origins, characteristics and its realistic enlightening aspects.

## **2.3. Research Questions**

Based on the previous studies, my research questions are as follow:

- (1) What causes the formation of Wordsworth's conception of nature?
- (2) What are the characteristics of Wordsworth's conception of nature?
- (3) What is the realistic enlightenment of Wordsworth's works to modern life?

### **3. The Historical Origins of Wordsworth's Conception of Nature**

#### **3.1. The Industrial Revolution**

The mid 18th century to early 20th centuries were generally regarded as the period of the industrial revolution. The whole industrial revolution could be divided into two distinct phases. The first industrial revolution occurred from 1750 to 1850, and the second from 1850 to 1914. The industrial revolution originated in Great Britain and gradually spread across the world. Generally speaking, the first industrial revolution was the process of revolution from handicraft economy to the economy which dominated by machine and science technology. The main features of the first industrial revolution were socioeconomic, technological and culture. It changed people's life from various ways. For example, human beings began to use the new materials, such as iron and steel, and new energies, such as coal, the steam energy and electricity, which had replaced traditional energy sources. But science technology was like the double-edged sword. On the one hand, it took convenience and happiness to mankind. On the other hand, it brought various problems. The most significant one was the pollution of the environment. In the 19th century, the capitalist industrial revolution had brought abundant material wealth, which had blinded the public to pay no attention to the environment. At the same time, a large number of waste gas, sewage and industrial waste were discharged directly into nature. It was proper to say that the industrial revolution not only deprived the hometown of human beings, but also threaten human life and health.

In Wordsworth's poems, the poet gave a deep thought to the behavior of human beings in pillaging natural resources and destroying the environment. The degeneration of human nature was also one of themes that the poet concerned about. And all these thoughts could be reflected from Wordsworth's poem *Lucy Gray*. In Wordsworth's poems, there existed the bright moon, fawns, hares, and any excellent things you could imagine. With the most common language and simple words, William Wordsworth described the pretty Lucy and her hometown-nature. William Wordsworth regarded little Lucy as the roses of June, which was pure, beautiful and flowery. The roses of the June were the most excellent gift for William Wordsworth, and he concerned that the excessive greed of human beings would make this beautiful thing suddenly disappeared from the world. In Wordsworth's poem *I Travelled among Unknown Men*, the poet wrote that "And she cherished turned her wheel,/ Beside an English fire" (1801). It was known to all that the textile machine was the symbol of the industrial revolution, and this poem revealed that the fruits of the industrial revolution have been deeply integrated into people's daily life. Lucy was the symbol of the nature, but Lucy was finally dead in England. For William Wordsworth, Lucy's death was the severest revenge of the nature, and the industrial revolution and human beings were the real murderers.

William Wordsworth was the spokesman of the nature. Human beings' greedy made him angry and he wanted to use poems to express his own indictment of human evil. The over-exploitation of nature would eventually make man lose all hope. But William Wordsworth also had a glimmer of hope for nature. His love of nature prompted him to write poems to call people to care the nature. Human beings not only needed to concern their own interests but also the benefits of the next generations. William Wordsworth was convinced that the relationship between man and nature was intimate and indivisible, so his poems expressed his love of nature, his strong criticism of the destruction of nature and his desires to construct a harmonious society. His theories of nature also took many realistic enlightenment to modern life. With the rapid development of contemporary society and the increasingly tense relationship between mankind and nature, we should pay more attention to the significant of nature environment than economy. Adhere to the rational development and construct a harmonious ecological environment is very necessary, and which was illustrated in Wordsworth's works 200 years ago.

Taking the industrial revolution as one of historical origins, it is proper to say that William Wordsworth's conception of nature was influenced by it and the minority of his poems reflected his personal attitude toward the industrial revolution.

#### **3.2. French Revolution**

French Revolution was a political movement which shook French society from 1784 to 1799. It had many similar causes with all revolutions of the world, but for some special reasons, it was regarded as one of the most violent and the most important revolutions in European history. The social structure of France was the first cause of this revolution. During 18th century, France still stayed in feudal society, but the feudal regime became more and more incompetent and their power and capability almost disappeared in the whole Europe. Compared with the weakness of the feudal regime, a new group emerged. Merchants, professional and manufacturers which were often called the bourgeoisie entered the

political arena. In the past, professions such as being a businessman were seen as menial and their social status was low. However, with the continuous development of capitalism economy, the merchant group began to control a large amount of social wealth, which also laid the foundation for them to gradually acquire social status and march into politics. The peasants, as the working people who lived at the bottom of the society, their living standard has been greatly improved and the education rate in rural areas has also been greatly improved. They began to be dissatisfied with the status quo and long for more freedom. With the improvement of living standards, people were disappointed with the incompetence of the government. A sharp rise of population had increased the demand of food and various consumer goods. In addition, the discovery of the new gold mines stimulated the market, and commodity prices generally rose. People's lives were miserable, and the inaction of the French feudal government led people to reconsider its role. It was in that context that some progressives proposed social reform. Many of the revolutionary ideas advocated by social revolutionaries were influenced by western ancient philosophers. But they also proposed different theory about political, economic matters and social affairs. These theories were regarded as the Enlightenment thoughts and they were widely accepted by the masses.

At the same time, William Wordsworth had just graduated from Hawkshead, and he attended St. John's College at Cambridge University. William Wordsworth suffered a terrible childhood after his parents died. His father's estate was long borrowed by a rich man, so William Wordsworth and his brothers were very poor for their first half of their life. The poverty from his childhood made him feel very inferior, and it also made him hate the exploitation from the aristocracy. William Wordsworth first came into contact with the French revolution in 1790. His childhood experiences have promoted him to put more enthusiasm to the revolution. He traveled to France three times and was inspired by the French Revolution's slogan- "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". During touring French, William Wordsworth cognized a French military officer. Their friendship had the great influence to Wordsworth's poems, and it also gave him a better understanding of the life and thought of the underclass in French. They often wandered along rivers and forests, feeling the beauty of nature while hating the dark and evil reality. The poet's attitude toward the revolution was shown on his poems. In poem London ,1802, William Wordsworth wrote that

Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour:

England hath need of thee: she is a fen

Of stagnant waters:

...

In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart

The lowliest duties on herself did lay. (1802)

William Wordsworth implied that London was a backwater of ideological decay, spiritual emptiness and selfishness. The poet praised the remarkable poet Milton, and hoped that Milton could come back to life and wake the English people from their slumber, so that England could start a revolution like the French Revolution.

William Wordsworth hoped that he could contribute his personal power like Milton, but he failed. French Revolution did not turn France into an ideal country which full of freedom and equality. The brutal dictatorship and tyranny of the Jacobin party made Wordsworth afraid and angry, and the bloodshed in Paris made him disappointed with the revolution. After Napoleon came to power, Wordsworth changed his attitude to revolution. Wordsworth began to use poetry to attack Napoleon's authoritarian and aggressive policies. In Wordsworth's view, the fruits of revolution had been stolen. The result of the effort was that old tyrant was replaced by a new tyrant, and the people were still suffering. He came to realize that revolution could not save the corrupt society. Therefore, William Wordsworth changed his mind and paid more attention to nature to find the lost ideals. William Wordsworth enjoyed an idyllic life, indulging in natural beauty. William Wordsworth's poems were influenced by the French Revolution, and his attitudes towards it were changed with the development of revolution. William Wordsworth's different attitude toward early and late revolution helped to shape his artistic features and his political view. Nowadays, more and more scholars began to take Wordsworth's poems as the object of research. Some people claimed that Wordsworth's behaviour to change his attitude towards the revolution was an act of cowardice and his attitude towards social affairs was negative. But other people thought that he was not trying to escape reality. He thought that nature could bring hope and enlightenment to people. If the revolution could not bring hope, it should be inclined to nature.

### 3.3. *Rousseau's Return to Nature Theory*

Romantic literature emerged at the late 18th century and reached its peak in the first half of the 19th century. As one of founders of the romantic period, William Wordsworth not only inherited the humanistic ideas of the Enlightenment, but also made a breakthrough in the content advocated by neoclassicism. On this basis, William Wordsworth gradually formed his own conception of nature. Contemporary scholars believed that the formation of Wordsworth's conception of nature was influenced and civilized by many literary schools, and the most striking of those was Rousseau's return to nature theory.

Rousseau's return to nature theory was a remarkable factor for William Wordsworth to form his unique conception of nature. Young Rousseau was born into a poor family. Like William Wordsworth, Rousseau had a miserable childhood. In order to make a quick living, Rousseau began to seek his own fortune early and lived a vagrant life. His rich social experiences made Rousseau understand the dark side of social development. Rousseau's humble origins made him to suffer bully and unfair treatment. Because of a clear understanding of the darkness and injustice of the world, Rousseau hated the social environment and he preferred to spend most of his time in nature. Whenever Rousseau encountered difficulties in reality, he would seek comfort from nature, therefore, he had a special feeling for nature. Rousseau had no formal education, so he formed his own unique literature theory and framework through self-study. It was the experience of being alone in nature that prompted Rousseau to have a deeper understanding of the relationship between ecology and economy, and it also laid a foundation for him to form his unique theory of nature. In Rousseau's works, he classified two kinds of human beings. The first kind of human beings were created by nature. They were close to nature and followed the laws of nature. They were pure people with the characteristics of justice, kindness and elegant. The second kind of human was those who grew up in the industrial civilization. They were originally pure at birth. But as they grew up in the industrial civilization and surrounded by the evil and darkness of the capitalism, they gradually lost their original humanity. Rousseau claimed that, on the one hand, the rise of capitalism and the rapid development of industrial and technological civilization greatly satisfied human's desire to conquer nature, and provided rich social wealth and personal interests. On the other hand, people began to become selfish and greedy. The original part of their humanity had been lost. The public mind was impetuous, the social was disorderly and the crime rate also rose sharply. The development of industrial civilization made people lose their original intention and belief. When people were immersed in the great progress brought by industrial civilization, Rousseau was aware of the destruction and corrosion of capitalism to social civilization and human nature. Therefore, he advocated people to return to nature and find their original humanity.

Rousseau's return to nature theory not only had an enlightening effect on the industrial society at that time, but also laid a foundation for the later poets to form their own literary view. The formation of William Wordsworth's conception of nature was deeply influenced by Rousseau's theory. After the defeat of the French revolution, Wordsworth returned to the English lake district with mixed feelings. Compared with the social turbulence and unrest, the stability of nature was admirable. Rousseau's return to nature theory had a great impact on Wordsworth's thought. Wordsworth was convinced that only by returning to nature could human beings restore their original relationships and the society could develop healthily. In his famous poem *The Solitary Reaper*, William Wordsworth wrote that

No Nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travellers in some shady haunt  
...  
Among the farthest He brides. (1807)

In this poem, William Wordsworth described a rustic country girl, who was alone cutting the wheat. Different from capitalism mechanized production, field life retained a unique poetic environment, and the rustic girl was indulged in this kind of life. Wordsworth claimed that people who were far away from the city life were more simple and kind. In addition, Rousseau believed that the education of infants and adolescents should follow the natural laws, and adult should not interfere too much. Influenced by Rousseau, Wordsworth also believed that children have the purest human nature. In one of his poems, William Wordsworth wrote that "The Child is father of the Man;/ And I could wish my days to be/ Bound each to each by natural piety" (1802). Children have the purest human nature, their minds have not been polluted by modern industrial civilization. Children were the "father" of adults. They had the

characteristics that adults did not have.

During the period of industrial revolution, people believed that human beings was the owner of the earth and they had the right to decide how to live with nature. The whole country was enveloped in noise, pollution and chaos. After witnessing the destruction and restraint of human nature by the industrial civilization, William Wordsworth believed that the essence of human being was eroded by interests, and return to nature was the only way for human beings to seek redemption. Mankind's attitude toward nature should be humble, and they need to respect and protect nature. In Wordsworth's poems, the poet gave a deep thought to the behavior of human beings in pillaging natural resources and destroying the environment, and his poems also reflected the poet's concern about the distortion of human nature. In his poem *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*, William Wordsworth wrote that

This city now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air. (1802)

William Wordsworth believed that the universe was a harmonious whole. Human beings and all creatures in nature were created by God. But due to human's greedy behaviour and selfish attitude toward nature, the relationship between man and nature was gradually unbalanced. The goodness of human beings was disappeared and the even birds and insect were sympathize of human beings. Both industrial civilization and revolution could not redeem human's soul, but nature could. The human society badly needed a power to carry on the self-redemption, and going to nature was the best way.

Under the influence of the Enlightenment and the French revolution, William Wordsworth's conception of nature was undoubtedly inspired by Rousseau's enlightenment thought. It was in that context that Wordsworth broke through the dull style of neoclassicism and made innovations in the content, subject and rhythm of poetry, and formed his unique conception of nature.

#### **4. The Characteristics of Wordsworth's Conception of Nature**

William Wordsworth is regarded as one of pioneers of romanticism natural poetry. Wordsworth calls poetry "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling", and he is praised by Shelly as "a singer of nature". "Nature" is the central theme of Wordsworth's poetry. In the majority of William Wordsworth's poems, nature is the main element. It is proper to say that William Wordsworth is nature's spokesman in the romantic period.

##### **4.1. Human Nature**

During the period of romanticism, nature was the significant theme which captured scholar's attention. William Wordsworth had a unique feeling for nature, which laid the foundation for him to become a master of natural poetry. For William Wordsworth, nature was like his mother, his teacher, his friend and his lover. Nature was the representative of perfect humanity. Nature nourished and soothed the human mind, and provided pleasure and education.

William Wordsworth's reflections on human nature began at an early age. After Wordsworth's mother died, Wordsworth's life was surrounded by the darkness. In William Wordsworth's view, nature was the creation of God. It was not only the landscape which opposite to the human world, but also the pure natural environment created by God before the birth of human beings. William Wordsworth believed that only by returning to nature could people possess divine human nature. Nature was the embodiment of perfect human nature. So the people who were perfectly human in his poems were common rural people who were close to nature. Most of these lonely people wandered in the wildness. In William Wordsworth's view, these marginal figures who were regarded as useless figures in the eyes of the world had rich connotations in the spiritual world. He claimed that these rural people who were isolated geographically from the polluted city lived an idyllic life. They were free from the interference of the civilized society. There were no various false refinement and artificial desire. In *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, William Wordsworth wrote that

I saw an aged Beggar in my walk;



And he was seated, by the highway side,

...

He travels on, a solitary man,

So helpless in appearance,

that for him The sauntering Horseman throws not with a slack

...

But stops.-that he may safely lodge the coin

Within the old Man's hat; (1888)

In this poem, the life of the old beggar was integrated with stone mound, walking stick and titts, which formed a unique landscape. Nature was not only the beggar's home, but also gave him strength and wisdom. Although he was a beggar, he embodied the perfect human nature in his body. Therefore, he was a nature force wandering among the peaceful society.

William Wordsworth thought these lonely rural people were not only noble, but also elegant. He had the different emphasis on the description of rural people of different ages and genders. He used different aesthetic dimensions to describe different figures. In the description of the beauty of girls, William Wordsworth focused on presenting their beauty. William Wordsworth believed that nature was a female who was characterized by kindness and warmth. When there was no one who cared about Wordsworth's feelings, it was nature who gave him comfort and encouragement. Therefore, in the majority of William Wordsworth's poems, nature was regarded as a woman or a girl, and it was evident in a series of poems in Lucy Gray, such as *We are Seven*, *The Pet-lamb*, and *She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways*. The beautiful maiden in Wordsworth's poetry was always compared with the lovely things in nature. In his one of poems named *Untitled*, the girl's eyes twinkle like the evening stars. In *The Solitary Reaper*, the solitary highland reaper was reaping and singing by herself, and William Wordsworth wrote that "no nightingale did ever chaunt" (1807). Those lovely girls' beauty were closely associated with their existing way. Loneliness was their way of existence, but they did not feel lonely. They had a natural affinity with the nature of all things. They were like the flowers, the seeds, and the stars which were integrated with nature into one.

Similar to Rousseau's return to nature theory, Wordsworth believed that the distortion of human nature was the result of erosion of modern civilization. Therefore, William Wordsworth advocated the establishment of a social civilization in accordance with human nature.

William Wordsworth also regarded nature as a real existent creature. He conformed that nature had a magic power to heal people's wound and guided human beings to find their original human nature. For William Wordsworth, nature acquired her own wisdom. Nature was not only the source of his childhood pleasure but also the origin of his moral and mental education. In the first volume of the *The Prelude*, Wordsworth referred to his childhood experience of receiving lectures from nature on theft. When he was stealing prey from another man's lasso, he heard a deep breathing in the mountains, followed by an indistinct sounds. Another time when he was floating on the river in a stolen boat, the strange feeling came again. The young Wordsworth was alone in nature, and the strange nature surrounded him and gave him a feeling of danger. Nature was like a dignified teacher, scolding him for his wrong behavior through words and actions, making him feel guilty for doing something wrong. She could brought people moral education and nature wisdom. She was the way of an omnipresent soul, pervaded the heavens and the earth. She became the universal spirit, and she was "the great soul, the eternal thought". Nature was like a lantern in the darkness which guided mankind to do the right thing. Nature took up the role as the teacher who shaped the moral and mental of William Wordsworth.

Wordsworth believed that the kindness and benevolent of human nature was eroded by the civilization of industrial bourgeoisie and eventually lost. He called modern civilization a "stupid and insane feat of humanity", and said the life in London was a mess and humanity was being warped. And it was only those people who returned to nature retained their full humanity in their inner world. In William Wordsworth's eyes, people who close to nature were the embodiment of perfect human nature. Nature was the symbol of human nature, only returning to nature, the original human nature could be regained and released. Wordsworth wanted to tell people that if people could merge with nature, they could keep their pure human nature.

#### 4.2. *Rational Nature*

William Wordsworth claimed that nature was the collision of reason and emotion. Wordsworth believed that nature had the magic power of reason, which endowed human beings with a certain spirit and provided them with a rational thinking in the living environment. It was proper to say that human nature was the lesson Wordsworth learned from nature in his childhood, and rational nature was Wordsworth's obsession to pursue a certain spirit under the inspiration of his nature teacher. William Wordsworth believed that nature had the power to heal the wounded heart and pacify emotion.

During the 19th century, European industrial revolution and the French revolution's ideological trend of seeking freedom were like a storm spread to the whole European continent. In the fever of success, people gradually lost their pious belief in God and nature. Human beings took emotion and freedom as the supreme judge. The result of this movement was the spiritual decay and it also ultimately led to the frenzy of the French revolution. William Wordsworth, as the pioneer of romanticism, was the first one who emphasized the important role of rationality in people's daily life. While emphasizing the role of rationality in reality, William Wordsworth also regarded recall and meditation as the medium of communication between emotion and reason. William Wordsworth argued that "emotion must be remembered in calm emotions, and it also needs the poet's meditation". It means that the public need rationality in their common life.

After witnessing the corruption and depravity of the society, Wordsworth gradually realized that human reason was unreliable. The result of the vicious development of personal reason was religious atheism and political anarchy. People suspected everything and their material desire were endless. Human beings gradually felt impetuous and restless. The ills of industrial revolution forced William Wordsworth to question the Enlightenment. He decided to find the original innocence from the magical deeds of nature and ordinary people. In the long poem *Michael*, the city's evil gobbled up the old shepherd's only child. After suffering the tragedy, the old shepherd "Among the rocks/ He went, and still looked up the sun and clouds" (1800). For the shepherd, nature was the symbol of affection and love. The shock of reality made the old shepherd disappointed with his life, so he chose to seek comfort and help from nature. William Wordsworth sympathized with the old man's lonely life, and he also expressed his hatred to the trend of his times.

The ideal country which Wordsworth expected to build was replaced by a tyrannical government. The shock of reality left Wordsworth disillusioned with the society of his time. Therefore, William Wordsworth claimed that revolution could not release mankind, and only by returning to nature, the wounded human heart could be healed and people's thoughts could sublimate. Many scholars thought that Wordsworth's return to nature was an escape from reality, but actually the goal of his whole life was to save human beings. He thought that the only way human beings get salvation from the disastrous consequences of industrial civilization was to get close to nature and return to nature. In his famous poem *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour*, William Wordsworth wrote that

'Tis her privilege,  
Through all the years of this our life, to lead  
From joy to joy: for she can so inform  
The mind that is within us, so impress  
With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
With lofty thoughts. (1798)

The poet described a beautiful picture of nature, and this piece of land was not polluted by modern industrial civilization. With the rapid development of society, the entire Europe's faith and tradition were shaken and collapsed, and it directly caused people's spirit chaos. People generally felt restless. Without the absolute rationality of faith, people gradually lost imagination and intuition. In front of the turbulent society and impetuous human beings, nature could provide a kind of faith for the human beings, which was to restore the calm state of mind of human beings, so as to obtain the real rationality. William Wordsworth believed that nature was good for calming people's fickle minds and giving them the ability to re-examine themselves. In his famous poem *To the Cuckoo*, William Wordsworth wrote that "O Cuckoo! Shall I call thee bird, / Or but a wandering Voice" (1798).

In contract to the chaos brought by modern industrial machines, William Wordsworth thought that

the quiet and serenity of nature had a profound effect on the human mind. In William Wordsworth's view, the cuckoo has been transformed into the "song" and the "hope". The "song" awakened people's inner yearning for rationality, while the "hope" guided people to move forward in confusion. According to William Wordsworth, nature not only endowed human beings with the belief of pursuing lofty rationality, but also with the mentality of yearning for the ideal state.

Compared with the social turbulence and the impetuous people, the stability and tranquility shown by nature were admirable. Wordsworth thought that modern people's life was hurry and aimless. Many people were overwhelmed by the fast pace of life. Social morality had become corrupted and confused. The money-oriented society made people irrational and they were more like human puppets living in the crowd. Therefore, William Wordsworth advocated people to return to nature and enjoy the solitude in their mind. In his famous poem *Hart-Leap Well*, William Wordsworth wrote that

I looked upon the hill both far and near,  
More doleful place did never eye survey  
It seemed as if the spring-time came not here,  
And Nature here were willing to decay. (1800)

Loneliness, as an important theme, often occurred in Wordsworth's poetry. William Wordsworth believed that one of the most significant causes of fickleness was the disturbance of earthly life. If one could get away from the modern cities, return to nature, and enjoyed the loneliness brought by nature, he could feel the rationality and wisdom of nature. It hurt William Wordsworth that people could not see the beauty of nature, and they could not appreciate the charm of nature. In order to highlight the characteristics of natural rationality, the natural images selected by Wordsworth in his poems were all quiet and ethereal states in the nature. For each period of the day, William Wordsworth preferred the early morning and evening. Wordsworth deliberately described the scenery at these periods, such as his famous poem *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour*. The poem mainly described one of the corners of London when the whole city was still sleeping. There were various kinds of beauty in London, but poet selected a quiet corner of the temple. By this way, William Wordsworth avoided the noise of the city and described a pair of pure beauty natural poetry, which gave readers a sense of dignity. In addition to the special description of nature scenery, the poet would also have the intention to take these periods as the background of story. In *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, Susan was carried out in the morning quietly infinite fantasy. In his poem *Lines Written in Early Spring*, William Wordsworth wrote that

To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man. (1798)

Nature was like the nurturer and guide of human beings, who was constantly giving the protection of human spirit. William Wordsworth believed that by being close to nature, human beings could not only get the support of thought and moral pleasure, but also find the source of inexhaustible moral power. William Wordsworth claimed that the universe was in harmony and all things enjoyed their own happiness. It was deplorable that only human beings often did the opposite things. Nature have the power to reduce the impetuous and turbulence brought by industrial civilization. Nature was the embodiment of rationality, which could eliminate the confusion and bondage brought by industrial civilization to human beings. William Wordsworth argued that nature not only provided pleasure for human minds, but also gave people the rationality. In the face of the hustle and bustle of the city and the impetuosity of the human heart, nature could provide a kind of faith for human beings. Nature could make man's heart get rid of the reality of pain and suffering, and acquire the wisdom of the rational.

#### **4.3. Divine Nature**

Pantheism was spread widely among European countries in the 19th century, and it influenced many poets. Some scholars claimed that the description of nature's divinity in Wordsworth's poetry was influenced by pantheism. William Wordsworth was a devout Christian, and the Christian doctrine had a great influence on the creation of his poetry. Just like Christians argued that God was the only one who could save mankind, William Wordsworth believed that nature was the symbol of God, and everything

in nature had the light of God's divinity. Returning to nature was the only way for human beings to achieve liberation and self-redemption.

Wordsworth believed that nature was divine. He often used various kinds of lights in his poems to describe the natural scenery, and these lights made the natural scenery that he wrote was suffused with divine brilliance. In his famous poem *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*, William Wordsworth wrote that

This city now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky. (1802)

Under the bright morning light, London shined brightly. Therefore, Wordsworth exclaimed that "Dear God! The very houses seem asleep; And all that mighty heart is lying still" (1802). William Wordsworth believed that nature had all the qualities of man, and nature understood what humans need and she could provide corresponding help. Nature have its unique wisdom and charm. In *The Tables Turned*, William Wordsworth persuaded his friend that

Let Nature be your Teacher.  
She has a world of ready wealth,  
Our minds and breathed by health,  
Truth breathed by cheerfulness. (1798)

Wordsworth claimed that too much devotion to books was harmful both to one's physical and mental health. Wordsworth suggested people to seek the unique wisdom of nature. Nature was full of divine wisdom, and going back to nature was far more rewarding than studying a book.

William Wordsworth believed that nature was the work of God, and that God was embodied in every creature of nature. In the poem *To the Cuckoo*, William Wordsworth wrote that

Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!  
Even yet thou art to me  
No bird, but an invisible thing,  
A voice, a mystery. (1798)

The poet thought that the cuckoo was not a common bird. It was the elves in the nature and a messenger of God's will. Nature was full of vigor because of mankind. For William Wordsworth, he believed that God's divinity was not only contained in nature, but also embodied in the rustic life of rural people. Although these people who were described by William Wordsworth lived at the bottom of the society and experienced all kinds of hardships and pains brought by life, they still retained the most perfect human nature, and that was- honest and kind. Compared with the decadent civilization of modern times, they chose misery. Therefore, their minds had not been destroyed by modern civilization, and still retained the most primitive divinity. Life was hard, but they were always in the company of the divine of nature.

Nature, according to Wordsworth, was the link between God and man. Man and nature were the products of God. People had a soul before he was born, and this soul had received the grace of God in heaven. So Wordsworth thought that children were the closest one to the divinity of God, because children come into the world with divinity at birth. They knew how to communicate with nature, how to listen to what nature taught them, and how to receive what nature nourished them. William Wordsworth also embodied this idea in many of his works. In *Lucy Gray*, Wordsworth portrayed little Lucy as a country girl growing in the countryside, away from the noise of the world. Lucy seemed to have no worries, carefree growth in the mountains and lakes, running in the fields and playing in the river. In his poem *We are Seven*, William Wordsworth portrayed a kind and innocent eight-year-old girl. In spite of her shabby clothes, her eyes were very clean. When Wordsworth asked "how many sisters and brothers do you have", the little girl said "there are seven of us". Then the little girl innocently introduced her brothers and sisters to Wordsworth one by one. Wordsworth looked around at the graves and marveled at the innocence of the little girl. The little girl did not know what death and parting were. In her eyes, she always had six brothers and sister with her. After years of training, adults were more and more involved

in modern society, the various divine glories they held were gradually eclipsed. Similar to the traditional Chinese idea of the primal goodness of human nature, Wordsworth believed that children were the most primitive state of human beings.

The experiences of childhood and inspiration of reality made William Wordsworth believe that nature was the incarnation of God. He claimed that there was a creature in nature, and it was the symbol of God's spirit. Children were a medium connecting human beings with nature. In the prosperous industrial civilization, human gradually lost their original faith and direction. Wordsworth thought that nature flashed the glories of God's wisdom, and return to nature was the only right way for human beings to get self-redemption. Just like God was tolerant of everything in the world, nature was tolerant of all human beings, and could civilize him no matter how bad his character was. Nature has its unique wisdom and charm, which could help human beings to washing the dirty in their heart and purifying human's mind.

## 5. Conclusion

To make a conclusion, this thesis attempts to analyze William Wordsworth's conception of nature. The author reinforces the structure of thesis and study Wordsworth's conception of nature step by step. In previous four chapters, the author analyzes Wordsworth's conception of nature from introduction, causes, and characteristics aspects. William Wordsworth believed that nature has three dimensions. The first one was human nature. William Wordsworth claimed that nature was the symbol of human nature. Just like human beings, nature has its wisdom and power. The second one was rational nature. Nature was the collection of reason and emotion. Nature has the magic power to heal the wounded heart and soothe the restless mind. The third one was divine nature. William Wordsworth claimed that nature was the incarnation of God, and everything in nature was divine. Nature was the ultimate spiritual home of human beings. It is obviously that Wordsworth has the wish to rebuild the relationship between human and nature. Returning to nature was the only way for man to get self-redemption.

After finishing these researches, the author finds that Wordsworth's love of nature is rooted in his personality and experiences, and his intimate relationship with nature has brought many benefits to him. Otherwise, Wordsworth gives nature a new definition and it breaks the decorum of neoclassical verse. His influences to his contemporaries and next generations have been profound and lasting, and it will be passed on from generation to generation. William Wordsworth's advocacy for the conservation of nature caused great repercussions in the industrial society at that time. The way industry developed at the expense of nature made people rethink their behavior. In fact, Wordsworth's advocacy had a great influence not only on his contemporaries, but also on the way of modern life. Nowadays, human industrial revolution has achieved unprecedented achievements, but the contradiction between man and nature was increasingly fierce. Global warming, environmental pollution and other environmental issues began to attract the attention of environmentalists. People began to realize that the deterioration of the ecological environment would affect the survival and development of human beings. Chinese government has increased its investment in environmental protection in recent years. Therefore, in the fourth plenary session of the 16th central committee, the representatives put forward the strategic goal of building a harmonious society. Wordsworth's conception of nature coincided with China's proposal to build a resource-saving and environment-friendly society. Harmony between man and nature was the basic feature of constructing a harmonious society. Only by caring for nature and protecting nature can human society develop into a truly civilized society.

This thesis summarizes William Wordsworth's conception of nature and its characteristics through careful analysis and interpretation of his poetry, which is of great help to the study of Wordsworth's works and his poetic theories. But there are also many limitations. Firstly, due to the lack of sufficient information and literature, the author does not have a comprehensive understanding of William Wordsworth, and the personal analysis of Wordsworth is not thorough enough. Secondly, since it is my first time to write a thesis, the content and structure of this thesis are not perfect. Finally, because the author's language ability is insufficient, the words and sentence patterns used in the thesis are too simple, and the structure of the thesis is not rigorous. In the future study, the author still needs to strengthen this ability and improve the corresponding writing methods.

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