

**Common People in the Poetry of William Blake and William Wordsworth in the  
Romantic Period**

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**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Degree of Master of Arts  
in English**

**Department of English**

**East West University**

**Date of Submission: August 2011**

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declared that this thesis is based on my original work except for quotations, and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted at other institutions.

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## **Abstract**

Inclusion of the common people through introducing simple language that represents the ordinary life style of the marginalized, ignored as well as deprived section of the society in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19th century English literature was one of the revolutionary ideas of the period. Taking such principles forward poets in the Romantic period such as William Blake and William Wordsworth portrayed lives of common people in the canvas of their poetry, which became realistic and represented an authentic picture of contemporary society. Therefore, this dissertation with a view to examining the treatment of common people by these two poets, will at first discuss “Romanticism”, while throwing some light on the history and background of the Romantic Age. The influence of both the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution is visible in the poetry of Romantic era. Ordinary people who were never considered to be a part of literature succeeded in attracting the attention of writers in literature after those two historically important revolutions. Realizing the strength of the common people, poets attempted to focus them through literature and thus a new era of poetry known as the Romantic era was established. The poetry of this era besides reflecting the lives of elites focused on the real life of the down-trodden. Moreover, some of the distinctive characteristics of the Romantic poetry that made it different from that of Neo-Classical poetry will also be discussed in brief. Finally, this dissertation will discuss the language through which William Blake and William Wordsworth depicted realistic lives of common people in their poetry.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **1.1.Introduction**

The Romantic era is different from the Neo-Classical one as it stood as a revolutionary movement against the pseudo-classical norms of the Neo-Classical age (Long, 2004). During the eighteenth century, the Neo-Classicists were mainly concerned about the correctness, reason and good sense of poetry and not the subject matter (ibid.). Reason would then act as the governing principle of creation and poets were guided by reason (Leogus, 1934). Therefore, more attention was paid to the classical style and fixed diction of poetry than to the role of genius, inspiration and imagination. The Romantic period started its journey at the beginning of the 19th century with its new thought, style, and philosophy that made this age completely different from the Neo-Classical one (Long, 2004). This difference was created by the movement of poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge who revolted against the set rules of Neo-Classical poetry. They emphasized passion instead of reason. They preferred to use the real language or the language of common people in poetry instead of artificial or 'poetic' language.

#### **1.2.Problem Statement**

This study shows how Romanticism was a period in human history where complex structure and forms were abandoned for simplicity in language and unrestricted thought (Gillingham, 2002). This dissertation specifically looks at the poetry of William Wordsworth and William Blake to find out the place of common people and their language in romantic poetry.



In Neo-Classical age, literature was under the sole control of the aristocratic section of society with its high standard of diction and subject matters or incidents mostly borrowed from the lives of citizens usually considered as elites (Day 1996). Lives of the common people and all their simple thoughts which arose from their day-to-day life remained almost intentionally suppressed up to the neo-classical age of English literature (Sanders 1994). However, the urge to be free from the code of set rules of the preceding era was not an outcome of that abrupt revolution. William Blake for the first time started dealing with the language of common people and later poets like S. T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth followed the same principle (long 2004).

Therefore, this study focuses on William Wordsworth's and William Blake's collective effort to introduce a new conception by establishing the language of common people in English Literature.

### **1.3.Purpose Statement:**

This dissertation aims to show the emergence of Romantic verses as poetry for all including even those who used to speak in ordinary day-to-day language. A radical shift in the use of language was found in the romantic age since the preceding age known as the Neo classical age continued the use of elevated version of language in literature (Sanders 1994).

In the Romantic age poets like William Blake, S. T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth started using the language of common people (Sanders 1994). Moreover, even the life style of those down-troddens were portrayed as themes of literature. Sanders (1994) notes that literature was confined only to the drawing room of aristocrats during the Neo-Classical Age, but gradually shifted to the cottages of common people by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By this way, from the "dressing table" of Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* literature came down straightly to the highland lass in "The Solitary

Reaper" (ibid.). Such a shift can easily bewilder any person without literary background. Therefore, this dissertation will portray how the French revolution along with Industrial revolution made a significant contribution in swaying the poets of the Romantic period to the language of common people. According to Gordon (1948), poetry in the Romantic Period did not lose its profundity since the simplified version of language used in the poetry of Romantic Age succeeded in coming up with deeper meaning. Therefore, this dissertation will hopefully end up in refuting the misconceptions of those who take it for granted that simplification in language also brought simplification in theme and meaning of poetry in the Romantic period.

#### **1.4. Central Research Question:**

- How did William Wordsworth and William Blake revolt against the poetry of Neo-Classical age and encourage everyone's access to poetry?

#### **1.5. Delimitations:**

Several themes were dealt by the poets of romantic period; the researcher will focus on the theme of common people in order to narrow down the research.

#### **1.6. Limitations:**

Due to the lack of materials this research will not go beyond the poetry of Wordsworth and Blake.

## **1.7.Operational Definitions:**

### **1.7.1. Common People:**

The term "Common People" refers to those who are ordinary in their lifestyle and usually belong to the lower tiers of society and are always disregarded and deprived in every aspect of their lives.

### **1.7.2. Romanticism:**

It is not easy to define "Romanticism" as the real meaning of the word 'Romantic' does not convey exactly what it means in art and literature (Sanders 1994). Stephen Martin (1986) tried to define romanticism by saying that it is a literary movement and a profound shift in sensibility had taken place in Britain and throughout Europe roughly between 1770 and 1848. Intellectually, it marked a violent reaction against the Enlightenment. Emotionally, it emphasized the importance of the self and valued the experience of the individual along with the sense of the infinite and the transcendental (Martin 1986). The stylistic keynote of Romanticism is intensity and its watch word is imagination (ibid.). Imagination along with emotion and freedom are certainly the focal points of Romanticism (long 2004). In fact, Romantic poets enjoyed the freedom to choose their subject matter. Therefore, this immense freedom paved the way for Romantic poets to choose quite simple subject matter and focus on common people in Literature.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1. Salient features of Romantic Poetry:

English Romantic poetry has certain qualities that make it different from the poetry written before. The chief characteristics of Romantic poetry are usually defined in contrast with that of the eighteenth century literature written in the age of Swift, Pope and Johnson (Abrams 1960).

According to Day (1996), Neo-Classicists stressed reason and judgment while romantics emphasized imagination and emotion. He again notes that, Neo-Classists asserted the values of society as a whole whereas Romantics championed the values of the individuals. Day (1996) then declares that, Neo-classists sought to follow and to substantiate authority and the rules derived from authority while Romantics strove for freedom. Neo-classists took their primary inspiration from classical Greek and Roman authors but Romantics took a revitalized interest in medieval subjects and settings (Day 1996). Neo-classists took subject matter from the aristocrats or elite class while Romantics took subject matter from day-to-day life of common and rustic people (ibid.). Thus, Neo-classists were concerned with elevated language but Romantics were concerned with simple and ordinary language.

These contrasts provide a useful way of approaching to the English poetry of Romantic Age. According to Chen (2004), they help put us in touch with what William Hazlitt and other Romantic writers call the "Spirit of the Age". Some prime features of Romantic poetry are discussed below:

### 2.1.2. Subjectivity:

All Romantic literature is subjective in nature. It is an expression of inner urges of the soul of the artist (Gillingham, 2002). The poet does not care for rules and regulations, but gives free expression to emotions. He/she writes according to his/her own fancy, and is often guilty of wild excesses. Romantic poetry is fanciful, and is often marked by extravagance.

### 2.1.3. Love of the Supernatural:

According to Bottrall (1970), the romantic is extraordinarily alive to the wonder, mystery and beauty of the universe. He further says that, the romantic feels the presence of unseen powers in nature. The unseen, transcendental world is more real for the poet than the world of senses; hence it is an important element of Romantic inspiration.

### 2.1.4. Imagination

James (1963) noted in his *The Making of Literature* that, romantic poets considered imagination as the supreme faculty of mind. This attitude of the romantics made them different from the poets of the Neo-classical era where reason was the supreme faculty of mind. Romantics tended to define and to present the imagination as our ultimate "shaping" or creative power, the approximate human equivalent of the creative powers of nature or even the deity (Bowra 1966). Imagination is the primary faculty for creating all art. If we think broadly, we find that imagination helps us to constitute reality since we not only perceive the world around us, but also create it in our own way.

### 2.1.5. Love of Nature

Nature is one of the dominating features of Romantic poetry. William J Long (2004) says, romantic poets were intimate with nature and fused to bring romantic effect in their poetry by visualizing nature. To the romantics, nature was both real and visionary. Long (2004), then, revealed that romantic poets considered nature as a living soul which was mighty and gigantic. To them nature had close affinity with the working of man's mind and morals. Romantic poets took help from nature in expressing human feelings, emotions, joy and happiness. They at times sought a divine presence in nature. Wordsworth's pantheism is a good example of this tendency (Long 2004). According to Wordsworth, nature was not merely a healthy, living force but also an instructor, a great educator of man; the nurse, the guide, the guardian of human heart and soul and of man's moral existence (ibid.)

### 2.1.6. Simplicity in Language:

James (1963) said that, while dealing with style, romantic poets maintained individuality. However, they had uniformity in using simple language in poetry. They did not use artificial modes of expression, the style of Classical poets. Language became a mark of the difference between the poetry of the Neo-Classical age and the Romantic age (Danby 1960). Romantic poets revived the idea of using simple language in poetry. They tried their best to bring the standard of language down to the stage of common people. Thus simplicity in style became a prominent feature of Romantic poetry.

### 2.1.7. Presentation of Common People:

Presentation of common people is a revolutionary thought as well as one of the prime features of Romantic poetry. Poets of this age were interested to deal with the life of common people. According to Sanders (1994), Blake for the first time brought common people in his poetry and later Wordsworth and Coleridge published Lyrical Ballads through which the idea of common people as subject matter of verse was fully established. The hearts of the Romantic poets were full of sympathy for the poor and the down-trodden. For this reason they created a bridge between the poetry and the language of common people by using simple diction in poetry (Sanders 1994). Thus it can be said that “they glorify the innocence and simplicity of the common man. They try to see the divine in Man, plead for his emancipation from all bondage and claim equal rights and liberties for the humblest” (Gillingham, 123, 2002).

### 2.2. Historical Background:

#### **2.2.1. The influence of the French Revolution**

French Revolution had a profound influence on Romantic Poets. There was little or no freedom of speech or expression in places that were ruled by oppressive tyrannical regimes. Such was the situation of France under the monarchist dictatorship of the Catholic king Louis XVI (Long 2004). The society was confined within the perimeters defined by the government with unfair laws and unequal distribution of resources (*ibid.*). Therefore, the living conditions of the people determined their state of mind which would always have a great influence on the nature of literature that was produced from that region.

In a divided society where people are segmented into nobles and clergy on the one side and the working class on the other, the literature of that time was quite restrained. All the literary materials composed in that period focused on the lives of the upper class, namely the nobles and the clergy. This is because the common man was too busy working and was of much less importance to those who were writing at that time (Ford 1990). Literature composed in the period used to throw its light only on the brighter side of society where the glittering lives of the nobles were focused, while the huge working class remained unnoticed (*ibid.*).

According to Chen (2004), as the Revolution triumphed the absolute monarchy that had ruled France for centuries, collapsed in only a few years. This resulted in a complete transformation of society. A majority of the population was greatly in favor of this as the working class had been suffering oppression for many years. According to Albert Hancock (1968), “The French Revolution came bringing with it the promise of a brighter day, the promise of regenerated man and regenerated earth. It was hailed with joy and acclamation by the oppressed, by the ardent lovers of humanity, by the poets, whose task it is to voice the human spirit” (124).

Prior to the French Revolution, poems and literature were typically written about aristocrats and the clergy, and rarely for the working man (Gordon 1948). However, the roles of people in society began to shift after the French Revolution, and with the emergence of the Romantic writers (*ibid.*). Poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley started writing for and about the common and ordinary people (Abrams 1960). According to Barasch (1957), “To get the real animating principle of the Romantic Movement, one must not study it inductively or abstractly; one must look at it historically. It



must be put beside the literary standards of the eighteenth century. These standards impose limits upon the Elysian fields of poetry; poetry must be confined to the common experience of average men" (78).

Wordsworth visited France during the summer of 1790 and was filled with hope and excitement as the country celebrated the first anniversary of the fall of Bastille (Chen 2004). In *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt (1934) said that the French Revolution seemed at first to announce that "a new impulse had been given to man's minds" (XVII). The sense of being present at some apocalyptic event of history was common at this time: hopes were high that mankind was about to see the end of the old world and the beginning of a new and better one (Hazlitt 1930-34). Looking back at this time over ten years later, Wordsworth gave expression to what must have been a widespread feeling at the outset of the French Revolution:

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy,

For great were the auxiliars which then stood

Upon our side, we who were strong in love,

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very heaven!

(*The Prelude* 1805. X 105-09)

Literature began to take a new turn when the spirit of the revolution caught the entire English nation and turned things in a whole new direction. The newly acquired freedom of the common people did not

only bring about just laws and living but ordinary people also had the freedom to think for themselves, and in turn the freedom to express themselves (Chen 2004). Triggered by the revolutionary spirit, the writers of the time were full of creative ideas and were waiting for a chance to unleash them. Under the new laws writers and artists were given considerable freedom to express themselves (Chen 2004). This did well to pave the way to set a high standard for literature.

### 2.2.2. The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution in England marked the beginning of the modern era. It caused profound economic and social changes (Leogous 1934). Therefore, the existing principles and structures of government were totally undermined. All the stable and developed cities situated in central and northern England developed into sprawling, dirty industrial cities (Chen 2004). Working and living conditions in these cities were terrible. Women, children and men labored for long hours under intolerable conditions, but the wage they could earn was not enough to keep them alive. Young children were harnessed to work in the mines where they had to crawl on their knees and hands.

Wordsworth's early poems also contained a number of figures whose undeserved suffering is caused by that unfair and uncaring society (Gordon 1948). Blake pointed out the miseries of the Londoners in his daily observation (ibid.). In his poem titled "The Chimney Sweeper", he describes that the little boy has been sold by his father to be a sweeper at a very young age when he could not even utter "/s/" at the beginning of words. He attempts to cry "Sweep! Sweep!" but his childlike voice turns out to be "Weep! Weep!" The double meanings of "sweep" and "weep" immediately gave us a pathetic impression of the state of his slavery (Chen 2004). More than ever England was sharply divided into two classes: a wealthy

class of property owners who held economic and political power, and a poor class of wage earners deprived of rights and possessions. In response to the rapidly changed society, Wordsworth showed his anger towards the sheer waste and sadness of life in his "The world is too much with us"

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! (1-4)

To writers, the Romantic Age was a time of vast and unguided political and economic changes. Most writers of this period were deeply affected by the promise and subsequent disappointment of the French Revolution, and by the distorting effects of the Industrial Revolution (Day 1996). In many ways we can see historical issues reflected in the main literary concerns of the Romantic poets.

According to Day, (1996) the French Revolution attempted to break with the old order and to establish a new social system. Romanticism in the same way wanted to be free from the rules and standards of eighteenth century literature. Day further mentioned that Romantic poets in fact, wanted to open up new areas of vision and expression. Even, the democratic idealism of the French revolution had interest in the language and experience of the common people and writers felt they must be free to explore their own imaginative worlds. The Industrial Revolution resulted in the urbanization of English life and landscape, and the exploitation of the working class (Leogous, 1934). These changes doubled the

romantic poets' love of the unspoiled natural world or remote settings devoid of urban complexity. The poets were also concerned for the down-trodden and the oppressed.

### 2.3. Critique's Review

According to Long (2004), the reaction of Romantic Age against the Neo-Classical age took place over the issue of the language of common people. He further says, the revolution came to the light because of the publication of *The Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 that was the result of a united effort by William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge. But the seed of this revolution was planted even before the publication of *The Lyrical Ballads* by William Blake with his *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794. This is how the literature of Neo-Classical Age started losing its appeal.

In introducing a new era in the field of literature in the Romantic Age, the French Revolution and American Revolution contributed a great deal (Chen 2005). These two revolutions (happened outside England) distributed the basic values and structures of English society. Chen (2005) says, "Philosophically the French Revolution seemed to signal the victory of ever more radical democratic principles than those enunciated in the American declaration of Independence" (3). Indeed, it was the most significant event of the Romantic period.

Scott (1963) mentioned in his *English Literature* that the Romantic Movement lasted from about 1750 to about 1870, and is often defined as second Renaissance. He further notes that, romanticism cannot be identified with a single style, technique, or attitude, but romantic writing is generally characterized by a

highly imaginative and subjective approach, emotional intensity, freedom of thought and expression, an idealization of nature, and a dreamlike or visionary quality.

James Scott (1963) reported that Romanticism swept across Europe in the first half of the Nineteenth Century and transformed the way people thought about themselves in every national culture from Russia to England. He then said Romanticism represents a rebellion against Enlightenment thinking. It replaces faith in reason with feeling as the stronger expression of what we are. It is restless with practical reality and prefers visionary longing and excitement to the complacency of everyday reality (Scott 1963).

In their choice of subject matter, the romantics showed an affinity for nature. The romantics also established a connection between nature and people who lived close to nature and had a mysterious relationship with it (Scott 1963). Nature comes to new prominence in Romantic poetry. It had the widest possible connotation. Nature, for the Romantic poets, included landscape, trees, plants, hills, rivers, mountains as well as rural folks (common people) together with their cottages, sheep, goats and rural festivals (Scott 1963).

Maurice Bowra (1950) said that the Romanticism of social protest reflects the revolutionary fervor on the Continent, especially in France in the last decade of the Eighteenth Century. He also said that, the aftermath of French revolution was also visible in literature. Thus, a drastic change took place in literature through replacing the noble subject matters by those that are utterly ordinary and simple and gleaned from the day-to-day lives of the common people. Poets

like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake were inspired and took a new turn by avoiding the so called principles of Neo-classical poetry.

According to Frye, (1960) Blake looked through the surfaces of supposed good sense and orderliness and discovered instead cruelty and injustice. He then noted that, poems like “London” and “The Chimney Sweeper” are meant to unsettle the confidence of the complacent middle class reader by forcing him to recognize the evils at the heart of the Imperial city. When you look at the splendor of the King's Palace, you need to see the blood of young men dripping down the palace walls, young men who die daily to extend the Empire in far corners of the world (Frye 1960). Blake's outlook is political and moral and entirely hostile to the entrenched reality (*ibid.*).

John Williams (1993) notes that, Wordsworth was similarly at war not only with the way things are in society but also within himself. He was weary of the bland self society had constructed for him, especially of the routines of the commercial city, where everything had a purpose measured by time and money (Williams 1993). For Wordsworth, Nature represented a Divinity, a source of energy that could return him to his true self, now eclipsed by everyday routines (*ibid.*). Like Blake, Wordsworth invited us to see beneath the surface reality and reason and replace it with feeling and emotion, a more original and authentic version of ourselves (Day 1996).

## CHAPTER III

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Inclusion of common people is one of the revolutionary ideas of the Romantic age. To showcase the treatment of common people, the study discusses in detail Romanticism, the trends of poetry in the Romantic period and the influence of the French and Industrial revolutions. Views and opinions of different critiques have also been included. The study will now focus on selective poems of William Wordsworth and William Blake to analyze the treatment of common people in their poetry. From Blake poems titled "The Little Black Boy", "The Shepherd", "The Lamb", "London" and "The Chimney Sweeper" will be discussed. Poems such as "Poor Susan", "Solitary Reaper", "I wandered Lonely as a Cloud", "Michael" and "Lucy Gray" by Wordsworth will be analyzed to focus on his treatment of common people.

#### 3.1. William Blake

William Blake can claim to be the first Romantic poet, although his songs precede the Romantic era (Scott 1963). This claim receives validity for some strong reasons, such as his rejection of literary tradition, his imaginative exploration of human psyche and his visionary accounts of man's physical war against restraint and moderation in all forms of human experience (ibid.).

It is important to say a few words about Blake's early life and work. He was born in Soho, London, where he spent most of his life (Long 2004). His father, James Blake, was a successful London hosier (ibid.). He was first educated at home, chiefly by his mother, Catherine Wright Armitage (ibid.). Blake's first biographer, Frederick Tatham, wrote that he "depised restraints & rules, so much that his Father dared

not to send him to school" (Gillingham, 2002). Blake started writing poem at the age of 12. According to Gillingham (2002) Blake was both a mystic and visionary poet and his poetry is a reflection of his inner vision. Throughout his life he composed poems that were far reaching in both their scope and range of experience.

William Blake believed that all human beings are born in a state of Innocence. By "Innocence" he means that infants and children are in fact part of God, and they see with the eyes of God (Martin 1969). For children, everything around them is beautiful and true. As we grow up and leave childhood behind, experience teaches us that the world not only contains beauty and truth, but also a darker side. People can be tainted here with negative emotions like hate, envy, jealousy, fear, poverty, and despair (James 1963). This for Blake is the state of Experience. According to Blake, we should not see poems as mirror, but as the interplay of light and dark that has close connection with human life and its affairs (Bottrall 1970).

In several poems Blake depicts the lives of common people, especially children and deals with their joy and suffering. Again, the simple language of his poetry opposes the elevated tune of Neo-classicism (James 1963). Blake's mastery lies in his capacity to unfold his thoughts filled with mysticism and a vision using ordinary language in his poetry. Indeed the language of Blake's poetry reflects the simple language of ordinary people.



### 3.1.2. "The Little Black Boy"

There is an age-old history of the deprivation of common people who have always been ignored by upper class society (Danby 1960). Among them Blacks were in the worst situation in Blake's age and could be considered even commoner than common people. The perils blacks used to go through were much more than the ones faced by white common people of the society. Through his poem "The Little Black Boy" Blake dares to speak of the black boy as a human being and not as an idealized primitive. The poem of course is a protest against slavery and a clear expression of Blake's humanitarian impulses (Ford 1982).

In the poem titled "The Little Black Boy", Blake has made a little black boy the protagonist to display society's malevolence towards such children. In his day Blake was sensitive about the color discrimination practiced by Englishmen (Ford 1982). The English employed black boys as servants in their houses. However, there was a strict barrier against the intermingling of English boys and the sun-burnt black boys. According to Frye (1966), under the aegis of Methodist society there was a movement to convert blacks into Christianity. Blake wrote this poem by the time the Methodist Missions were established for the purpose. The following lines of the poem expose the inner sufferings of the black boy:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,

And I am black, but O! my soul is white.

White as an angel is the English child

But I am black as if bereav'd of light (1-4)

In this poem the black boy is well aware of his drawbacks and infirmities. He is black and sun burnt, while the English boys are angelic in their fair skin (Bottrall 1970). The black boy is exposed to the scorching heat of the sun and patiently suffers everything. Thus the deprivation of the common people has been sensitively portrayed by Blake. He has brought the example of a simple poor black boy who represents disadvantaged and marginalized people of society. The little black boy represents the marginalized people and the language of this poem also resembles the language of common people who use it in their day-to-day business.

### 3.1.3. "The Shepherd"

According to Frye (1966), Blake's "Shepherd" contains an aspect of innocence represented by the sheep and the shepherd. In this poem Blake deals with the simple daily life of a shepherd who is fortunate enough to spend his whole day guarding his sheep in a valley from morning to evening. Although the poem has religious significance, the protagonist has been chosen from the common people. The whole poem is outstanding for its use of simple and ordinary language. The following lines of the poem stand for Blake's distinctive use of simplified language:

For he hears the lamb's innocent call,

And he hears the ewe's tender reply;

He is watchful while they are in peace,

For they know when their Shepherd is night (4-8)

As a religious mystic Blake always took his symbols from nature. In this case he depends upon the common people completely. The protagonist of Blake's poem is taken from rural life. Even the landscape around the shepherd is pastoral, showing the typical atmosphere of village life.

#### 3.1.4. "The Lamb"

For this poem the narrator, addresses the lamb as the simplest, most innocent and most tender of God's creatures. Blake paints here a scene of rural beauty which is blissful, tranquil, calm and serene (Bottrall 1970). This is the world of innocence seen in the natural world; note the contrast between this world and that of "London" (ibid.).

The setting of this poem is pastoral and far apart from the city life where the rich dwell. The neo-classical poets could never think of dealing with such a setting let alone using the people living in such an atmosphere. Although the poem is couched in the simplest of forms and language, Blake is asking a profound question through it: "Little Lamb, WHO made thee?" In effect, Blake is asking who created all of us? The power of the poem lies in the question repeated four times: "Who made thee?" Blake invites the reader, to ask this profound and fundamental question for themselves (Abrams 1960). Poets in the neo classical age had never dealt with such a profound theme using a language so simple and so easy to understand.

### 3.1.5. "London"

"London" is one of Blake's most powerful poems. According to Ford (1982), it is a devastating critique of a city where almost every inhabitant is suppressed and exploited by those in authority and power. Ford (1982) further notes that, in this poem, Blake hears the terrors of poverty and exploitation in the cries of men, women and children. London is like a spiritual wasteland where young chimney sweepers are forced into slavery (Frye 1966). Here soldiers spill their blood to protect the rich and the wealthy. Moreover, young women, and girls here are driven into prostitution where diseases destroy not only their lives but the lives of their new-born infants. The carriage that should bear them into the joys of marriage becomes a hearse transporting them to disease and death.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

How the youthful harlot's curse

Blasts the new-born infant's tear,

And blights with plagues the marriage hearse (13-16)

This poem is full of Blake's criticism of society and the whole trend of contemporary civilization albeit in a very simple and ordinary language.

In this poem Blake focuses on the real ordinary people such as soldiers, chimney sweepers and prostitutes who remain under powerful and influential people. The miseries of such people results from utter deprivation in every sphere of lives have been delineated in language used by the ordinary people.

As a critic of an unjust society Blake raised his voice through this poem. Here he talked about prostitutes

and soldiers who had a hard time under the oppression of the powerful ones. They belong to the most marginalized section of the society. Neo-classical poets, in contrast, dealt characters and subject matters that existed in upper class society. They could never think go beyond the arena of elites. Therefore, using simple language dealing with profound thoughts was a unique power of a poet like Blake.

### 3.1.6. "The Chimney Sweeper"

In "The Chimney Sweeper", Blake calls attention to one of the blind-spots of "enlightened" English society (Bottrall 1970). This poem is an example of Blake's treatment of common people. The poem was written in simple language and the darker side of the lives of common people is seen in it. Blake here criticizes a society where people misunderstand the emotions of children and force them towards child labor (Ford 1982). This is the result of an unbalanced society where the poor engage their children in income generating activities that take the pressure off the parents' shoulders.

And because I am happy, and dance, and sing,

They think they have done me no injury,

And are gone to praise God and His Priest and King,

Who make up a Heaven of our misery. (9-12)

Frye (1966) in his A Collection of Critical Essay notes that, this poem exposes the hypocrisy of conventional religion; the father and mother have gone to church to pray while their child was

abandoned to the elements. When the narrator asks the chimney sweeper where his parents are; the child tries to explain that they have abandoned him to misery. Frye (1966) again mentions that the poem is also critical about our neglect of children's emotions. Because the young sweeper might appear happy, in the sense that he is making the best of a dreadful situation, his self-serving and self-deluding parents choose to believe that they have done him 'no injury'.

A black boy is the protagonist of the poem who belongs to the lower class. The suffering of such children is caused by the misinterpretation of religion. A subject matter of this kind had never been treated before by any Neo-classicist.

### 3.2. William Wordsworth

The poet who expressed the deepest aspiration of English Romanticism was William Wordsworth. He (1770-1850), was born the second child of John and Ann Wordsworth at Cockermouth, Cumberland, on April 7th, 1770 (Long 2004). Wordsworth was living a happy childhood at Cockermouth until 1778, when his mother died and the family was split up. Wordsworth's sister Dorothy was sent to live at Halifax with her mother's cousin, and the boys of the family were sent to school at Hawkshead where they were educated well and cared for (Williams 1993). It is very likely that Wordsworth became a solitary person who had no friends but only nature (ibid). However, owing to this solitary nature, he had gained an opportunity to think deeply and quietly and more importantly, to appreciate the beauty of Nature that is, more often than not, easily ignored by people. Just this beauty gave inspiration to William Wordsworth's numerous famous poems.

Presentation of common people is the most important characteristic of Wordsworth's poetry which is the main concern of this research. While Blake was a pioneer in the field of dealing with common people, Wordsworth was the poet who took common people as the subject matter of his poetry and his strong devotion towards his intention made him successful in doing so. According to Hough (1953), through the strong handling of Wordsworth the theme of common people got a basis that was mainly established in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads". In this piece Wordsworth included his theory of poetry and under in it he presented a detailed discussion on the role of common people in literature. He held that the common life of the poor simple people could serve as fit material for poetry, and that the diction (words and phrases) to be employed in poetry should be drawn from the everyday speech, the formula with which he led the revolt against the artificial diction of the eighteenth century Neo-Classical poetry (Loegous 1934). Poems such as "The Solitary Reaper", "To a Highland Girl", "We are Seven", "Poor Susan" and several other poems illustrate this theory.

### 3.2.1. "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads"

Wordsworth begins his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* focusing on the style and subject matter of poetry. He claims, "Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language" (3). He stresses that feelings "coexist in a state of greater simplicity" (3) and, as a result, are "more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated" (3). From this perspective, Wordsworth advocates the success of poetry as an art form reflecting human experience.

Wordsworth wrote the "Preface" to inform readers about his purpose in writing poems such as "Lines Written in Early Spring", "Mad Mother", "We are Seven" etc. One of the main points of the piece was to underscore Wordsworth's intention to depict common people, with their own language in poetry.

According to Wordsworth, his principal object was "to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature" (p 2).

There are various reasons why Wordsworth preferred 'incidents and situations of humble life' as the themes of his poetry.

Firstly, it gave him the space to enlarge the range of poetry releasing it from the rule-bound and suffocating atmosphere of contemporary poetry (Williams 1993).

Secondly, he was well acquainted with rural life and had sympathy for rural people. Therefore, he wanted to render it accurately and feelingly (Jones and Tydeman, 1972).

Thirdly, he believed that a poet is essentially 'a man speaking to man'. Since he is a man, and he has to appeal to the heart and mind of man, he must study human nature and try to understand, "The primary laws of our nature" (p 3). Now these primary instincts and impulses which govern human conduct can



be understood by studying the simplest and most elementary forms of life (Ford 1966). In humble and rustic conditions a man appears to be more natural than in the sophisticated societies of city. Wordsworth did not think city life to be the proper subject of poetry, because there the fundamental passions of the human heart could not be freely expressed.

Finally, he preferred rustic and humble life because the passions of men in that condition are the result of nature (Jones and Tydeman, 1972).

Wordsworth made it very clear in his preface that he wanted to depict common man in a "selection of language really used by men"(p 1). He achieved his goal with lines such as "And I must think, do all I can / That there was pleasure there" from the poem "Lines Written in Early Spring," where he used very simple language. Wordsworth often chose poor rustic settings for his poetry and avoided writing about courts in which Kings and Queens lived luxuriously (Ford 1982). The characters of Wordsworth's poetry are also pretty simple common people, for example, the little cottage girl in "We are Seven".

In "Mad Mother" Wordsworth writes "Sweet babe! They say that I am mad, / But nay, my heart is far too glad." These lines convey the feeling and emotion that the mother feels. Danby (1960) said her feelings give importance to the poem, because they illustrate the sadness she feels from having society looking down on her as mad. They also show how happy she is to find one person, her baby, to love her. Without these strong emotions, the situation in the poem is nothing more than a mother holding her baby. But with the feelings expressed, the "Mad Mother" is able to give the situation feeling and meaning (Frye 1966).

For the most part, Wordsworth's collection of poems is a manifestation, illustration, and example of his ideas about poetry. Here he defined his own theory of poetry and justified his instinct of bringing the language of poetry down to the level of common people through using simple language and ordinary subject matters.

### **3.2.2. "Poor Susan"**

The Reverie of "Poor Susan" is a simple poem about a poor girl named Susan. Wordsworth's purpose behind writing this poem was to show the contrast between the life in the countryside and that in the city. Wordsworth is able to successfully show that the blessed sights and sounds in nature that are easily found and enjoyed in the countryside can only be discovered in the city through the exercise of the imagination (Danby 1960).

The poem focuses on a poor country girl who has come to London to earn her living. She had been living in the countryside and was very much acquainted with the natural scenes and sounds. The idea behind the portrayal of these natural scenes was to show the pleasure Susan felt when she imagines these things. Another thing presented in the poem is one's love for one's home. The setting and character of the village represents openness and freedom. These qualities give one a sense of belonging and a sense of security. Such gifts are not to be discovered in the city. This sense of belonging and security is so pleasant that it takes the heart of Susan to heaven:

And a single dwelling on earth that she Loves.

She looks, and her heart is in heaven (11-12)

The poem is an apt example of Wordsworth's theory of poetry. He speaks for a common girl in simple language. In this poem, Wordsworth selected humble and rustic life to convey the real message of common people where life is not confined within boundaries. The subject, technique, imagery and diction: everything is depicted according to the theory of Wordsworth. There is nothing ornamental or artificial in the poem.

### **3.2.3. "Solitary reaper"**

Along with "I wandered lonely as a cloud", "The Solitary Reaper" is one of Wordsworth's most famous post-Lyrical Ballads lyrics (Hough 1953). In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth said that he was able to look on nature and hear "human music" (Williams 1993). In this poem, he writes specifically about real human music encountered in a beloved, rustic setting. The song of the young girl reaping in the fields is incomprehensible to him since the girl was singing in the Scottish language. Still he appreciates her tone, expressive beauty, and the mood it created within him, rather than its explicit content, at which he could only guess (Hough 1953). To an extent, then, this poem ponders the limitations of language, as it does in the third stanza "Will no one tell me what she sings?" but what it really does is praise the beauty of music and its fluid expressive beauty, the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" that Wordsworth identified as the heart of poetry (*ibid.*). The following lines of the poem also represent the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling":

I listened, motionless and still;

And, as I mounted up the hill,

The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more. (29-32)

By placing this praise and this beauty in a rustic, natural setting, and by establishing as its source a simple rustic girl, Wordsworth acts on the essential values of Lyrical Ballads. The poem's structure is simple—the first stanza sets the scene, the second offers two bird comparisons for the music, the third wonders about the content of the songs, and the fourth describes the effect of the songs on the speaker, while the language is always natural and unforced. Additionally, the final two lines of the poem (“Its music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more”) return to the theme of memory, and the soothing effect of beautiful memories on human thoughts and feelings. This poem manifests the humble and rustic life of common people; thus it follows Wordsworth's theory of poetry described in “The Preface” to *The Lyrical Ballads*.

#### **3.2.4. “I wandered lonely as a cloud”**

This simple poem, one of the loveliest and most famous in Wordsworth's canon, revisits the familiar subjects of nature and memory. It is extremely simple and depicts the poet's wandering and his discovery of a field of daffodils by a lake, the memory of which pleases him and comforts him when he is lonely, bored, or restless (Hough 1953).

According to Williams (1993), the characterization of the sudden occurrence of a memory—the daffodils “flash upon the inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude” (21-22)—is psychologically acute, but the poem's main brilliance lies in the reverse personification of its early stanzas. He further noted that the speaker of the poem is metaphorically compared to a natural object, a

cloud—"I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high..." (1-2), and the daffodils are continually personified as human beings, dancing and "tossing their heads" in "a crowd, a host." This technique implies an inherent unity between man and nature, making it one of Wordsworth's most basic and effective methods for instilling in the reader the feeling the poet so often describes himself as experiencing (Williams 1993).

Although, this poem deals explicitly with nature, the language used in it reflects the poet's intimacy and proximity to the simplified version of language that he believes best represents the emotions of common people. The poets of the neo-classical age had never dealt with such a profound theme using a language so simple and so easy to understand. They never thought of composing poetry beyond the boundary of the rules and fixed diction of poetry. Wordsworth through his poems crossed the margin of strict regulations and composed poetry such as "I wandered lonely as a cloud" from his powerful feeling. Williams (1993) notes that, like the maiden's song in "The Solitary Reaper", the memory of the daffodils in this poem is etched in the speaker's mind and soul to be cherished forever. The plot of the poem is simple. When he is feeling lonely, dull or depressed, he thinks of the daffodils and cheers up. According to Danby (1960), through this poem Wordsworth conveys two of the fundamental principles of the Romantic Movement, the beauty of nature, unkempt by humanity, and the feeling of reconciliation of man with his environment.

### 3.2.5. “Michael”

Wordsworth believed that poetry should deal with the life of ordinary people and should be written in common, everyday language. However, eighteenth century poetry generally dealt with upper class society and its people. They preferred artificial diction and elevated language for poetry since a selected class of society used to read poetry. Thus, poetry written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century completely abandoned common people and natural ordinary real life. However, Wordsworth revolted against this tendency of the Neo-classical poets. He was the first poet to write about humble people and “Michael” is one of such poems of Wordsworth written in a rustic setting.

“Michael” deals with the domestic life of an ordinary shepherd. The story of “Michael” is about a shepherd, a profession that is connected to common people. Michael loves his land and his profession, thereby loving nature. He has worked relentlessly throughout his lifetime, and because of his attachment to nature he is uncorrupted by society and his morals remain intact.

The language of the poem is simple and is taken from common everyday speech. Few lines from this poem are good examples of the simplicity of Wordsworth’s language:

Thus his Father’s sigh the boy grew up:

And when he had reached his eighteenth year,

He was his comfort and his daily hope (204-6)

In “Michael”, the shepherd, a common man who is very close to nature, is the most moralistic and saintly of men. Without nature man could not survive, yet without man nature's true beauty would not be exposed. Two places in “Michael” represent the extremes of good and evil. The mountains

symbolize Nature, and everything that is good and moral. The city represents society, and the corruption of morals and goodness. People living in the country side are usually common people who stay close to pure nature and feel nature as something divine. On the contrary, those living in the city are usually upper class people who have never been close to nature and therefore are unable to feel the presence of nature. Nature, as has been discussed, has a pleasant influence on people and purifies their morals and imparts its influence on common people like Michael. In contrast, corruption has conquered city life where people have also become corrupt.

The poem does not possess an exciting or sensational plot. Indeed, it is an uneventful story. Through this poem, Wordsworth himself shows that it has no dramatic situations, no suspense, and no tense moments. It is a simple domestic tale that speaks about the poet, shepherd, dwellers of the valley and the people whom the poet loved.

It was the first domestic tales that speaks to me  
Of shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men  
Whom I already loved; not verily  
For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills (22-25)

Among the narrative poems of Wordsworth, “Michael” occupies a high rank and is regarded as his best verse-tale. Wordsworth rightly called it a pastoral poem.

### 3.2.6. “Lucy Gray”

In preface to the *lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth desired to show his concern about low and rustic life and recommended making poetry more accessible to ordinary people. This is one of the outstanding poems in which Wordsworth’s theory of poetry found a strong base.

This poem is about a simple, solitary rural girl named Lucy Gray. She is introduced as an isolated figure. Her father asks her to take a lantern out to help her mother. Lucy does this cheerfully but this is the last time her distraught parents see her. They have just begun to accept that she must be dead, when they catch sight of her foot prints, which they follow until they reach the middle of the bridge, when the footsteps stop suddenly.

Lucy is a very simple girl who likes other ordinary people including her parents live quite close to nature. Each line of the poem introduces us to a simple rustic life devoid of the artificiality of aristocracy. Our hearts overflow with pity when we come to the following lines:

They wept; and turning homeward cried,  
In heaven we all shall meet (41-42)

This simple language succeeds in arousing strong feelings in the mind of the readers. The powerful rhyme pattern and yet simple structure and content are some of the striking features of the poem. Therefore, this poem is a good example of Wordsworth’s deliberately working with everyday accessible forms of language.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

That William Blake and William Wordsworth both paid equal devotion to common people is evident in any analysis of their poetry. In fact, the French revolution had a similar effect on these two poets who later on undertook a revolutionary attempt to deal with ordinary people in literature. They kept themselves away from the aristocrats and gave much importance to ordinary life. Thus, the depiction of common people became more prominent in the literature of Romantic age. Both poets used simplified language to make their literature understandable to everyone. To this end they used the language of everyday conversation of common people and contextualized it with great skill in their poetry.

Blake in his poems made the simple shepherd, a little black boy, a chimney-sweeper, children, nurse etc. as subject matters of his poetry. Wordsworth also dealt with the life of a simple highland girl, a maid-servant, people like Lucy Gray and Poor Susan who belong to lower classes. Blake protested against society and its subjugation of common people and focused the hard lives of the common people. But Wordsworth intended to establish the language of common people in literature.

After analyzing the poems of William Wordsworth and William Blake it seems to me that both share the same intention of making their poetry simple. Although, *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge accuses Wordsworth of violating his own poetic theory in poems like, "Ruth", "The Thorn" etc. I think excluding those few poems Wordsworth was able to confound his own poetic theory in his poems like "The Solitary Reaper", "Simon Lee", "We are Seven", "The Mad Mother", "Lucy Gray", "Poor Susan" etc.

which contain very simple language. Blake like Wordsworth is another poet of common people who used simple language in his poetry. Blake's poems were thought to be used as nursery rhyme at first. This proves the extent of simplicity of the language of Blake's poetry.

Literature is the mirror of a society and poetry since the Romantic era appeared as an authentic mirror through reflecting lives of the common people who were ignored before. Thus, poetry in the Romantic era became more inclusive with its new focus on common people which was introduced by poets like Wordsworth and Blake. They could shape poetry as a mirror which used to reflect a holistic society projecting both the upper (elites) and the lower (ordinary) class people and their lives and poets in the later periods followed the footprints of Wordsworth and Blake.

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