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## A Comparative Study of Wordsworth and Goethe

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A Comparative Study  
Hordworth and Goethe

Mabel H. Tibbott.  
May 25-1897.

## A Comparative Study of Wordsworth and Keats.

The Puritans left as a legacy to the 'Golden Age' that followed them, a strictness and regularity, which speedily crystallized into the Classicism of the famous school of Dryden and Pope. Shakespeare was laughed at, the fields were neglected for the city, the forest-springs for the town-pump. Imagination was a crime, emotion was humbug, faith was hypocrisy. The Court-circle was amused and flattered, the masses went by unnoticed. And yet these writers claimed to write according to nature, to do and say only that which nature prompted. But it was not God's beautiful broad creation they saw - it was only the little, mistaken, shrunken idea of it that they had planned out for themselves. Dryden, bitter, sarcastic, cold, unfeeling patriot that he was, received the adulation and praise of the whole literary and social world. Pope, whom we can imagine as having written beautiful poetry had he lived in a different century, compelled his imagination to roar no higher than the house-tops, and robbed his expression of all adornment, so as to keep up with the prevailing fashion of the time. Gay and Prior tried to amuse the world with coarse wit and affected mirthfulness.

In the midst of these charred and blackened ashes of poetry, a flame pure and bright, refreshing

and wholesome dart forth suddenly. Thomas Parnell has written his short volume of verse, and cast it forth on the inappreciative world. "The Night-Piece on Death" proved to us that at least one of the poets of that time saw and admired the stars, heard the twittering of the birds in the early morning, noticed the trembling of the leaves in the summer breeze. But he was scarcely noticed in the rush of events, and soon Gray was attracting all attention to himself with his finished fourth numbers, and beautiful figures and images. Gray, graceful singer as he was, spent too much time in his study, instead of searching out the beauties of nature for their poetical. It was really Thomson who first showed people in his "Seasons", the possibilities of the common everyday phenomena that were taking place all around them. To him the world owed the great debt of pointing out to it, the way to fields and brooks, though he ~~scarcely~~ had had a glimpse himself. Percy in his "Reliques" also performed ~~a~~ <sup>merely</sup> a praiseworthy service by reviving the ancient ballads, thus generating a love for simplicity and freedom of thought. The trend was toward the return to nature, the sympathies were enlisted in this direction, but there must arise one strong, able, willing; one thoroughly, —

heart and soul, in love with nature; one <sup>who</sup> could see the external beauties, and also penetrate into the internal secrets of her who ~~she~~ reveals herself <sup>only</sup> to those who love her best - to lead (the wandering, erring people back to the mother of all. And (this one stood forth. It was Wordsworth.

Born in the mountains; he always loved them, and it was his happiness to be among those friends of youth. He grew up as other children, yet seeing, or at least feeling, a nearer ~~and~~ relation to objects around him than did his playmates. He himself tells us that while at play, in the midst of fun and laughter, he would steal away by himself to listen to the mysterious sounds of the throbbing earth. At college, he was gay among the happy, quiet among the studious, but he never forgot his native hills, and the influence of the country was always predominant. The French Revolution then came to put the world in an uproar. Always ardent, a partisan of freedom in all its phases, Wordsworth was wildly enthusiastic for the Republic. He watched its course in great excitement, and only stopped short of joining the Revolutionists in person. The bloody deeds of the Reign of Terror did not overcome his belief in the Republic, though it disgusted him with the fanatics. It was only when the Republic was merged

into the Empire, that he entirely lost faith and turned away, his belief in human nature shaken to its foundations. His spirit had forgotten the sweet healing influence of the quiet words. The time seemed past when he could say:

"From nature (and her over-flowing soul,  
I had received so much, that all my thoughts  
Were steeped in feeling; I was only then  
Contented, when with bliss ineffable  
I felt the sentiment of Being spread  
O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still;  
O'er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought  
And human knowledge, to the <sup>human</sup> eye  
Invisible, yet liveth to the heart;  
O'er all that leaps and runs, and shouts and sings,  
Or beats the gladsome air; o'er all that glides  
Beneath the wave, yea in the wave itself,  
And mighty depths of waters."

He turned to abstract science to stifle the eternal questions of his awakened soul. But he won no relief there. The playmate of his childhood, the companion of his youth, the counsellor of his manhood - ~~the~~ <sup>his</sup> sister - in whose right those days were past -- maintained for me a serious intercourse with my true self. -- She in the midst of all, preserved me still a spot made me

such beneath that name and that alone, my office  
 upon earth." Thus he was led back "to those great  
 conflicts between head and heart whence grew that  
 genuine knowledge... which through the later sinkings  
 of this cause, hath still upheld me and uphold me  
 now." They lived together in an obscure corner of  
 England, and Wordsworth never afterward left the  
 country and mountains and streams that were the in-  
 spirations of his poetry.

A kind of heavenly destiny,  
 I liked the greeting I was a sound  
 Of something without place or bound.  
 And seemed to give me spiritual right  
 To travel in this region bright."

How different is the sentiment when visiting the same country thirty years later, writing in Address at the departure of Miss Walter Scott for Naples.

"A trouble not of clouds, or weeping ~~seign~~ rain,  
 Nor of the setting sun's pathetic light  
 Engendered, hangs o'er Eildon's triple height:  
 Spirits of Power, assembled there, complain  
 For kindred Power departing from their sight.  
 While Tweed, but pleased in chanting a blithe strain  
 Saddens his voice again, and yet again."

Wordsworth early felt his mission in life to be to show people by his life and poetry, the everlasting truth, and the everlasting beauty in nature. Matthew Arnold says:

Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make

us share it.

In most men, love of humanity takes a precedence in their hearts - they begin by depending entirely on man, and only come to nature when utterly despairing of the goodness of humanity. Then they seek the broad unchanging, though ever changing, bosom of earth and learn to love her above all else. But Wordsworth began the other way. Through nature he was led to love of humanity.

"But blessed be the God  
Of Nature and of Man that this was so;  
What man before my inexperienced eyes  
Did first present themselves thus purified,  
Armored, and to a distance that was fit:  
And so we all of us in some degree  
Are led to knowledge, wheresoever led,  
And howsoever; were it otherwise,  
And we found evil as fast as we find good  
In our first years, or think that it is found,  
How could the innocent heart bear up and live!  
Thus he was preserved from the early follies of youth,  
and "looked on man through objects that were  
great or fair." And it took him many years  
to put man above nature. Nature was true -  
man fickle. Nature was everlasting - man but a

breath. He understood this so fully that he says at the end -

" -- the scale of love  
though filling daily, still was light compared  
With that in which her mighty objects lay."  
His tributes to his constant unchanging love, are  
many and appreciation.

"O Nature! thou hast fed  
My lofty speculations, and in thee  
For this weary heart of ours, I find  
A never-failing principle of joy and purest passion.

"Thou power supreme! who, aiming to rebuke  
offenders, dost put off the gracious look  
And clothe thyself with terrors like the flood  
Of ocean, roused into his fiercest mood."

And in direct contrast comes this  
O ever-pleasing solitude  
Companion of the wise and good  
Thy shades thy silences now be mine,  
Thy charms, my only theme".

Every thing from a dairy in its white full-piping  
coquettishly out of the grass, to the cuckoo, heralding  
the approach of spring "with its twin notes inseparably  
paired", receives his notice and affection. The common-  
place becomes picturesque at his touch - he sees the  
beauty, and he makes you see it. And not to

human passion, to human sorrow, is he unfeeling -  
 "Laodamia", his adaptation of the Greek myth; "Mi-  
 chael", that tale of the shepherd of the hills, touching,  
 and quietly passionate; "The Brothers" - how sweet their  
 boyhood devotion, how pathetic the grief of the one left alone;  
 "The Affliction of Margaret" - what true material af-  
 fliction; and how delicately sketched are - "She dwelt  
 among untrodden ways;" "Three years she grew in sun  
 and shower"; and "She was a phantom of delight, the  
 last a description of his wife. In no place does  
 Wordsworth seek the aid of stilted metaphor or bil-  
 liant rhetoric to bring about his delightful effects.  
 He uses the simplest language, showing everywhere  
 the most concise, most easily understood ex-  
 pression, never rising to sublimity, rarely falling  
 to mediocrity. It is true, sad to say, that in some  
 cases, he carried the homely metaphor too far - such  
 prosaic things as a wash tub or a work-bench may  
 have been poetical to him who saw poetry in every-  
 thing, but to us it seems a too flagrant breach  
 of poetic license. He had high regard for the poet's  
 office and mission to the world, considering him  
 the teacher of mankind. And it is <sup>now</sup> generally ac-  
 cepted fact that the poets have had great influence  
 in social and political life, by their life and

writing. Matthew Arnold says - "Poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes the nearest to being able to utter the truth."

To Wordsworth there was something deeper in nature than what the eye could see, or the ear hear - there was God. For this has he suffered much censure - been called a pantheist. Because he has not in many writings specifically indicated his belief in Christianity has he been blamed as an infidel. But how more certainly can belief in a personal Deity be expressed than in the following:

A gracious Spirit o'er this earth presides  
And o'er the heart of man: invisibly  
It comes, to works of unexpressed delight,  
And tendency benign, directing those

Who care not, know not, think not what they do.  
And how more beautifully has belief in immortality been expressed than in his deathless ode.

Our birth is but a sleep, and a forgetting,  
The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath elsewhere had its setting,  
And cometh from afar;  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home."

Yes, Wordsworth had his mission, and he fulfilled it. For all around him sprung up the Poets who threw off the last shackles of the iron classicism, and the world enjoyed Byron and Tennyson and Shelley and Keats and Browning. Before he died he had seen men interested in the world around them, he had seen his beloved nature appreciated. Strong and sturdy pioneer in a new field of literature, he plowed the furrows deep and broad, and sowed the seeds of love for nature. The vigorous growth still bears fruit today; and may it go on to enrich posterity in honor of him who labored so long and so hard for the sake of English poetry.

And was it only in England that a return to simplicity and a love for the external world had to be engendered? No. for in France, Rousseau spent his life laboring for that end, and in Germany Herder, Schlegel and Schiller and Goethe sought to turn the current of men's thoughts from the artificial to the real, from the superficial to the deep. Pedantry prevailed, deceiving men's minds with pretended knowledge, instead of filling them with real benefit. Men needed

to be directed to high and right-minded thinking, to be brought out of the narrowness of the past into the broadness of the future. To reform themselves - in their minds, and their hearts, by a deep culture, instead of trying to effect important reforms by mere external influence and struggle. Then (man) all worked for the common end, but all others soon grew dim in the bright glare that surrounded Goethe for fifty years and more. For it was he, more than any other, ~~rather~~ all others, who in singleness of purpose, did the most for Germany and her literature.

Though Goethe did not perform the office of leading man to nature, it may be said that he brought nature to man. For it was man first with him - it was man's good and happiness to know nature, therefore he worked for her appreciation. Gay, careless and happy, deeply sensitive to beauty whether in a maiden's face or figure, or in a tiny violet in the leaves, he was yet stern enough master of himself, to preserve his ideals in the midst of his pleasures, and to give the world poetry which has scarcely ever been surpassed, ~~instead~~ instead of living in idleness and luxury as he could have done. His genius is his

strength and is to be admired with such an admiration that is given to few. His genius offers many points for discussion - ethics, philosophy, science, nature-study, or greatest of all, poetry, purely and simply.

Impatient of all restraint his writing follows the Romantic school. He draws his inspiration from all sources. He seeks abroad as well as at home for his education. In Tasso he says -

A noble man can not thank one small circle for his culture. His native land and the whole world must influence him. He must learn to suffer fame and blame alike." And again in speaking of the attributes of a poet he says -

His eyes scarcely rests on the earth;  
His ear hears the harmony of all nature.  
What story teaches, what life gives,  
His heart accepts at once, and willingly.  
His understanding collects the widely scattered  
Elements,

And his feeling survives mortality.

Often he enumerates what seems common to us,  
And then - treasures become as nothing before him."

Goethe wrote for the love of writing - because he had gone through some crisis. For every experience

in Goethe's life, we have a novel or poem. He <sup>wrote</sup> only ~~wrote~~ what he had felt, never going into the realm of the unknown for what might happen. Perhaps for this reason he had at first a repugnance to having his work in print. He wrote for his friends - for himself. And he says -

"He who does not see the world in his friends

Must not take it amiss, if the world sees not him."

But to treat of Goethe in all his phases would be impossible. As the student and lover of nature we may compare him to Wordsworth. It seems strange that the first man to begin investigation for the writing of a life of Goethe, should be an Englishman. But so it was, and Lewis has given to the world an appreciative and faithful account of Goethe from youth to old age. He says of him: "His constant striving was to study nature as to see her directly, and not through the mists of fancy or through the distortions of prejudice - to look at men and into them - to apprehend things as they were. In his conception of the universal he could not separate God from it, placing Him above it, beyond it, as the philosophers did who represented God 'whirling the universe round his finger' 'seeing it go' - Such a conception revolted

him. He animated fact with divine life; he saw in Reality the incarnation of the Ideal; he saw in Morality the high and harmonious action of all human tendencies; he saw in Art the highest representation of life." Bethel himself says speaking of a period of deep grief - "I turned more than ever to nature, there alone I found comfort." His devotion to the wild-flowers is as great as Wordsworth's, and he has written an exquisite verse to the Violet. He finds delight in the trickling stream that turns the mill-wheel. His pleasure in an early spring morning overflows into;

"Come ye so early  
 days of delight?  
 Making the hill-side  
 Blithesome and bright;  
 Merrily, merrily,  
 Little brooks rush,  
 Down by the meadow  
 Under the bush.  
 Welkin and hill-top  
 Azure and cool,  
 Fishes are sporting  
 In streamlet and pool.

Birds of gay feather

Flit through the grove,  
Singing together ditties of love.

Busily coming

From moss-covered towers

Brown bees are humming

Deerating for flowers.

Lightsome mutations,

Lip every where,

Faint wafts of fragrance

Scents the air."

In Goetz of Berlichingen he makes the hero say that he knew every pass, pathway and ford about the place, before he knew the name of village, castle or river." His descriptions are all vivid and living. From this same play the gypsies camp into which Adhelheid has wandered is very vivid and striking. To take Luwe's except-"Amid the falling snow shines the lurid gleam of the gypsy's fire, around which more dusky figures, and this magnificent ~~figure~~ creature, shuddering as she finds herself in the company of an old crone who tells her fortune, while a wild-eyed boy gazes ardently on her, and alarms her with his terrible admiration." And who can read

the Garden-scene of Faust without calling it ad,  
and the Prison-scene, Auerbach's peller, and the  
witches' kitchen - the scenes fairly live before our eyes.  
Also where Faust flies out to the solitude of Monu-  
tain-cavern for relief.

"Spirit sublime, thou gav'st me, gav'st me all  
In which I prayed. Not unto me in vain  
Hast thou revealed thy countenance in fire.  
Thou gav'st me Nature as a Kingdom grand,  
With power to feel and enjoy it all. Thou  
Not only couldst amazed acquaintance yield'st  
But grant'st that in her profoundest breast  
I gaze, as in the bosom of a friend.  
The ranks of living creatures thou dost lead  
Before me, teaching me to know my brothers  
In air and water and the silent wood."

Compare this to Wordsworth's lines:

"Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!  
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,  
That gav'st to form and images a breath  
And ever-lasting motion, not in vain  
By day and star-light thus from my first dawn  
The passions that build up our human soul  
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man  
But with high objects, with enduring things-

With life and nature, purifying thus  
 the elements of feeling and of thought,  
 And sanctifying, by such discipline,  
 Both pain and pleasure, until we recognize  
 A grandeur in the beatings of the heart!  
 Nor was this fellowship withheld to me  
 With stunted kindness."

Both Wordsworth and Goethe must have found out  
 the efficacy of the advice given by Mephisto to Faust.  
 "Away with you into the fields - begin to sow and  
 delve - confine yourself and limit every wish  
 within a narrow circle - feed upon meats simple,  
 undigested - and live in short, beast-like,  
 'mong hearts - deem it no degradation thyself to spread  
 the dung upon the field, the growth of which thou art  
 to reap - this is indeed the best way to repair  
 life's powers, and wear at eighty a hale countenance."

In "Hermann und Dorothea" Goethe gives us a  
 whiff of the fresh country air that he loves so well.  
 The simple love-tale is adorned with the stately  
 hexameter metre, charming bits of description and  
 chance scenes so portrayed that they live before us.  
 Hermann in tears under the pear-tree, the bus-  
 tle and parting crowd in the little village; and  
 especially the Cyran spring, with the "faces meet-

ing and greeting in the surface of the water. In writing Iphigenia, Goethe has fused into the old Greek story the modern spirit of Christianity. Iphigenia the Greek priestess, would never have paused at deceiving the King and pleading with the statue. But the modern heroine hesitates, then goes to the King confesses all the plot and throws herself on his magnanimity. Her innate truthfulness cannot endure the thought of deception, and she flies to undo her lie. The King forgives and gives them god-speed, which would have been equally impossible in the Greek play. This sketch of two plays so widely different, shows in the one case, Goethe's ability to deal with a simple subject in a pleasing, unassuming, natural manner, at the same time expressing his love for nature; in the other case, his power of improving on the subject ready-made, and of stamping it with the impress of his modern, German, mighty individuality.

In comparing Wordsworth and Goethe as to their treatment of nature, a few quotations from each will best illustrate the similarity. This from Wordsworth: "There is a dark inscrutable workmanship that reconciles discordant elements, makes them cling together in one society." And the same idea in Goethe: "Nature

is the sole artist, out of the simplest materials she produces the greatest diversity, attaining with no trace of effort, the finest perfection, the closest precision, always closely veiled. Each of her works has an essence of its own; every shape that she takes is in idea utterly isolated, and yet all focus one." Wordsworth sings of his beloved Derwent:

"... Was it for this  
 That one, fairest of all rivers loved  
 To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,  
 And from his alder shades and rocky falls,  
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice  
 That flowed along my dreams? For this, didst thou  
 O Derwent! wind thy way among grassy hollows  
 Where I was looking on, as babe in arms,  
 Make peaches music."

And Goethe writes while on a sketching tour down the Rhine:

"The blending of all beauties; streams and dells,  
 Fruit, foliage, crag, wood, corn-field, mountain, vine,  
 And chieftain's castles, breathing stern farewells.  
 From gray but leafy walls, where Rhine greenly dwells."

Some of Goethe's observations on nature however find no equivalent or contrast in Wordsworth, such as -

"Nature! we are surrounded by her and locked in her clasp; powerless to leave her, and powerless to come closer to her." "Life is her fairest invention, and death is her invention for levying life in abundance." The next two however are <sup>completely</sup> alike in spirit if not in expression. "Nature is the living garment of the Deity," and Wordsworth's - "Nature's Self, which is the breath of God, or His pure word by miracle revealed."

In their lives as well as in their works the two poets have points of similarity and contrast. Both were influenced, admonished and worshipped by their sisters. The death of these sisters left each desolate, and <sup>mourning</sup> the loss of her who was the earliest friend and playmate. But how differently did the French Revolution affect them! Wordsworth, young, ardent, throws himself with all his passionate into the cause, watches the course of events with unwavering ardor till the Empire crushes his hopes in the glorious Republic, and leaves him, with his foundations torn away. Not so Goethe. He sees the end from the beginning, and calmly looks on at the battle of Valmy, feeling the strange cannon-fire, but immediately after is engrossed in watching the optical phenomena observed in the water. The battle fails to move him, but he is

fiercely roused up at the action of the Prussian soldiers in taking away the flocks of several shepherds, and killing them before their eyes, all in the name of the King. He himself says: "I confess that my eyes and my soul had seldom witnessed a more cruel spectacle, and more manly suffering in all its gradation. The Greek tragedies alone have anything so purely, deeply pathetic." His sympathies were quickly aroused at any suffering, and his philanthropic work was carried on in private from early manhood.

Like Wordsworth, Goethe has been called a pantheist, and with more cause. When only seven years old, he disliked the form of worship at the Church, and built up in his bed-room a little altar "to seek Him in His works", composed of types such as ores and other productions of nature, arranged them in symbolical order on a music-stand. For the flame to represent the soul's aspiration, he placed a log <sup>on top</sup> to be set on fire with the aid of the burning-glass and the morning-sun. Religious doubts and dissatisfactions were encouraged by the theological discussions in his father's family, and the frightened attempts to appease a wrathful Deity when the earth-quake at Lisbon shook the world. As he grew up,

his belief in an unchanging, beneficent God was increased, and finding no Church which coincided with his views, he arranged for himself out of the teachings of the Scriptures, of Spinoza and of nature, a religion which satisfied his needs. Shown out in his deeds of kindness to his more unfortunate brothers.

Goethe, full of passion, dazzling us with the brilliance of his genius! so many-sided, so various, we scarcely know him when we have looked at one side of his greatness. Yet we know him enough to love him. (In this point does Wordsworth fall below Goethe. We can admire Wordsworth, but he seems cold, far-removed from the living breathing mass of humanity. We look at him (respect him, agree with him perhaps, but we feel that he loves man for nature's sake. Goethe, in all his descriptions of natural scenery, introduces the human element - man is always the central figure. He recognizes the wealth, the beauty and the truth of nature, but he sees the divine spark in man which lifts him above it. Man is the offspring of nature, but he <sup>has</sup> also the spirit of God in his heart; and to Goethe this truth was so apparent that we may say he loved

nature for man's sake. He takes our hearts and holds them captive. German and Englishman alike - all bow down to his genius, and wonder. Our own Bayard Taylor expresses the general love for the Great Poet in his ode to Goethe, ending with these lines:-

"Dear is the minstrel, yet the man is more;  
 But should I turn the pages of his brain,  
 The lighter muscle of my voice would strain  
 And break beneath his lore.

How charged with music powers so vast and free,  
 How can we be great as he?

Behold him as ye fight with the strong  
 Through narrow ways, that do your beings wrong,  
 Self-chosen lanes, wherein ye press

In louder storm and stress,  
 Passing the lesser bonnet by  
 Because the greater seems too high,  
 And that sublimest joy forgo.

To seek, aspire and know!

Behold in him since our strong line began,  
 The first full-statured Man!

Dear is the minstrel, even to hearts of prose;  
 But he who sets all aspiration free  
 Is dearer to humanity.

Still through our age the shadowy Leader goes;  
Still whispers cheer, or waves this warning sign;  
The man who, most of men  
Hid the parable from lips divine,  
And made one talent ten!"

Mabel H. Tibbets.

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