Appreciation of William and Dorothy Wordsworth from Ecofeminism Perspective

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Abstract. This thesis analyses the attitudes towards nature and female in the literary creations of both William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy Wordsworth by introducing the approach of ecofeminism. Through Wordsworth’s masterpiece \textit{Tintern Abbey}, his worship of nature and the respect for women are evaluated. Concerning Dorothy, the focus of study is on her peculiar attitudes towards nature and her own gender identity by appreciating her poem \textit{Floating Island}. From the ecofeminism perspective, how William and Dorothy Wordsworth’s composition influenced by nature and feminist consciousness will be explored, and their works can be newly understood.

Introduction

William Wordsworth is the representative poet of the early Romanticism. He published \textit{Lyrical Ballads} cooperated with Coleridge, which marked the beginning of Romanticism. And his sister, Dorothy Wordsworth, an English author, poet and diarist, who was forced to live apart from William after the death of their parents. In 1794, William reunited with his sister, and since then, Dorothy became his companion, close friend, moral support, and housekeeper. Years later, they settled in Lake District and toured the scenic spots to enjoy the beauties of nature, which inspired them a lot and contributed to their remarkable literary attainments.

William Wordsworth is most celebrated for his poetry of nature, he chose subject from low-class and rustic life, especially children and women. His treatment of the matters connected with women is unprecedentedly ahead of the time and progressive. Dorothy Wordsworth and her works, represented by \textit{Grasmere Journal} with the specific feminine perspective, drew more attentions with the rising of feminist literary criticism. And from the ecofeminism perspective, William and Dorothy Wordsworth’s works can be newly understood.

Theoretic Basis

Ecofeminism is a newly developed branch of literary criticism, which emphasized destruction of nature and women caused by civilization and men. In the patriarchal society typified by the dualism between civilization and nature, men and women, nature and women are always inferior and dominated by the other side. Ecofeminists believe that there is a link between women and nature and there exists the same root between the oppression of women by men and the domination of nature by humans. Consequently, ecofeminists criticize the patriarchal cultural values. Exactly, they fight against those aggressive values which lead to exploitation and dominance. On the contrary, they praise women's nature. Ultimately, ecofeminists aim to set up a utopia following the principle of ecologism and feminism [1].

Ecofeminist Approach to William Wordsworth’s \textit{Tintern Abbey}

\textit{Tintern Abbey} is one of Wordsworth’s masterpieces and its brilliant writing style and great artistic quality tastes people of successive generations deeply [2]. The whole poem consists of five
strophes. The theme of it is mainly about the thoughts and feelings of the author when revisiting Wye River near Tintern Abbey.

**His Worship of Nature**

It is nature that always gives William peace, strength and knowledge. At the beginning of this poem, a vivid picture of lively and lovely scene is presented, the whole first strophe only describes the scenery near Tintern Abbey, the word “again” is used five times to express that the poet is very cheerful when recalling the beautiful sights which he enjoyed five years ago. He then expresses his long-term love and sense of belonging for the natural landscape, especially “in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din/ Of towns and cities” (l. 25-26), “In hours of weariness” (l. 27). With the “feelings too/ Of unremembered pleasure” (l. 30-31) in the nature, he has “owed another gift, / Of aspect more sublime” (l. 36-37), “In which the heavy and the weary weight/ Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened” (l. 39-41) and “While with an eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things.” (l. 47-49). The poet gain all these feelings and comforts from natural world, which can demonstrate his attention towards nature rather well. Although the subject of these feelings is human being—the poet himself, he was deeply influenced, even to say changed by the nature.

In the fourth strophe, the poet compares himself to a “roe” “bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides/ Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams, / Wherever nature led” (l. 67-70) and compares his “pleasures of boyish days” as “glad animal movements” (l. 73-74). In these figurative images, the tenor is a person while vehicles are animals, which indicate that the poet is at least not an adherent of anthropocentrism. And at the end of the poem, he clearly calls himself “A worshipper of Nature” (l. 152). All these evidences show that William Wordsworth can modernly be called an ecologist.

**Anti-androcentrism**

Women held a unique role in Wordsworth’s life. He treated them as his faithful audience and competent advisors, among whom, the three most important ones are his mother, his sister Dorothy and his wife Mary. They played the rules of not only the supporters of Wordsworth’s literary career, but also his mental and spiritual guides [3]. As a poet, his admiration of women and gratitude for their contribution were expressed through his poetry.

In the last strophe of *Tintern Abbey*, William Wordsworth turns his focus from nature to a woman -- his sister and expresses intense emotion towards her. He composes:

“My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; '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, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. …” (l. 121-134)

In these lines, the poet uses “her” to address the nature, believes that nature has “privilege” to lead our life from joy to joy, inform our mind, comfort us with peacefulness and beauty, and so feed us with lofty thoughts. All this power was exercised by a woman image, which consciously or unconsciously shows his appreciate and respect to women.

The last sentences composes that “after many wanderings, many years”, “these steep woods and lofty cliffs, / And this green pastoral landscape, were to me / More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!” (l. 156-159) these lines not only put his sister at a high position of his memory, but also
combine the nature with his sister, coincidentally matching the essence of ecofeminism, which is the identification of women with nature [4].

**Ecofeminist Approach to Dorothy Wordsworth’s Floating Island**

For a long time, as a female writer, Dorothy’s status in the history of British literature was not well recognized; on the contrary, there were so many misunderstandings on her works, which are mostly considered that her writing style is simple and unadorned without charming literary grace.

The poem _Floating Island_ was said to suggest an island on Derwent-water, which is said to have been composed by Dorothy Wordsworth so late as the year 1842 [5]. This poem is divided into seven strophes and every strophe includes 4 lines.

**Deconstruction of Anthropocentrism**

Anthropocentrism emphasizes human’s domination over nature, which is totally opposed by ecofeminists.

Dorothy Wordsworth is more willing to act as a quiet spectator while communicate with nature, rather than invade it, or achieve cultural utilization of nature by imagination like her brother. So to speak, in Dorothy’s literature text, nature is dominant, while the subjective thought of author herself is absent. In a particular level, this kind of absence exactly reflects Dorothy’s unique perspective on nature, which is a completely equal and non-utility view. For example, in the poem _Floating Island_, the poet composed several images without embellishment, such as “sky, earth, river, lake, and sea: / Sunshine and storm, whirlwind and breeze” (l. 2-3)

In the fourth and fifth strophe, the poet express that people can only “find” “Food, shelter, safety”, which is actually given and determined to be given or not by nature. This view fully deconstructs the anthropocentrism, as it composes:

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“And thus through many seasons’ space
This little Island may survive
But Nature, though we mark her not,
Will take away — may cease to give.” (l. 17-20)
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**The Voice of Woman**

As a female writer, Dorothy herself can be a typical representative of feminism. Although she and her works have been eclipsed by her brother’s reputation, her continuous composition and companionship with her brother as well as literature reflect the early awakening of feminist consciousness.

**Conclusion**

William Wordsworth’s worship of nature and the respect for women are fully reflected in his masterpiece _Tintern Abbey_. And Dorothy Wordsworth’s peculiar attitudes towards nature and her own gender identity are also embodied in her poem _Floating Island_. Although their style of writing, composing purpose, attitudes toward both nature and woman are different, their accompanying appreciation of nature and close attention on woman literarily encouraged the awareness of ecology and female. From ecofeminism perspective, their works can be newly understood and their position in literature history can be more comprehensively recognized.

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References


