

# An Approach to Multilateral Discussions for University Students Reading Wordsworth's Poems: A Case Study Aimed at the Diversified Understanding of Individual Values

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(Received 23 October, 2018)

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the methods of diversifying the topics for discussion in British literature classes at universities so students in various majors are able to participate in cross-genre debates by offering their own perspectives based on their individual experiences. For this paper, I chose several specific themes from Wordsworth's poems for students majoring in education and suggest that each poem offers a good opportunity for them to contemplate the difficult situations they may confront when they become teachers in the future. Finding answers for some of the themes might prove difficult. However, students do not need to establish a universal solution, because the very situation in which they are compelled to struggle to find the answer will help them realize the profound meaning of life as a human being. Discussion on controversial topics enables them to recognize ideas they might otherwise overlook if they were engaged in only one specific kind of value, and may make it easier for them to accept the extreme diversity of perspective their future students might embody.

**Keywords:** discussion, literature, poem, children, meaning

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## Introduction

The Romantic period in 18<sup>th</sup> century England emerged as a turning point for the literary movement, which included the flourishing of poets who were inspired by the revolutionary sentiment throughout the European continent. It was essential for poets such as William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) to advocate the importance of cultivating individual sensitivity and also to seek one's own internal voice by revealing one's true self to the natural world. These ideas and the themes they chose for writing poems were evoked by the spiritual awakening, which held that human beings have the immeasurable ability of learning everything they need through the primeval spectacle of the natural world. Their attitude towards the essential feelings of human beings raised questions on the materialistic views of that period and also encouraged many to realize the complicated and yet profound characteristics of human nature. This necessarily led to a new era in which individual feelings were regarded as the most valuable rudder guiding the direction of one's life. Wordsworth particularly insisted on the preciousness of the spontaneous and simultaneously instinctive responses to the natural phenomena in one's surroundings. This idea aroused the further ardent expression of individual feelings in the later period.

In this paper, I analyse three of Wordsworth's poems, all of which I read in a British literature class I taught in 2018 and which raised questions among the students in the class about their own inner feelings. I chose these three poems because the students, who are each pursuing the goal of becoming school teachers, perceived several themes in each poem as controversial also in the modern society; alternatively, in some cases, the poems required them to see themselves from the third person perspective, such that they were able to realize values and perspectives that differed from their own. Discussing these topics and considering our own true nature teach us how human beings embody complicated and deep feelings for various aspects of life, as well as how each person has different perspectives on events transpiring in the world. This also applies to small children, who Wordsworth advocated in his poems, following the influence of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the author of *Émile* (1762).<sup>1</sup>

### 1. 'Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman' and Ageing

'Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman' is a recollection of the poet, who confesses the complicated feelings he experienced when he helped Simon Lee, an old man in his neighbourhood. The poet describes how Simon was strong, energetic and respected by the village people when he was young. The poet also knows various legends of Simon, who had a strong sense of

nature and was proud of his job. His respect for Simon seems to continue indefinitely based on the first part of the poem. The poet's feelings also reveal the traditional customs of the community, in which the experiences of the elderly people are regarded as significant and modelled as the ideal. The students in my British literature class realized similar ways of thinking about our own community: we respect elderly people because of their experiences and knowledge.

However, the situation changes as time goes on. In the last part of the poem, the poet comes across Simon, who has aged and is overwhelmed at having to cut the tangled root of a big tree. The poet helps him and reels it off easily, for which Simon sheds tears of gratitude. Agony suddenly arises within the poet's mind. 'Alas! The gratitude of men / Has oftner left me mourning' (103-04).<sup>2</sup> Here, the students in the class offered topics for discussion: What is the cause of agony? Why can he not feel happy even though he helped the person in need and was rewarded by his words of gratitude? The students also proposed several hypotheses. (1) The poet feels sad because he realizes that Simon has abandoned his pride. (2) The poet feels sad because he imagines how Simon feels ashamed of showing gratitude to another person for an act he could perform without trouble in the past. (3) The poet observes the loss of dignity in Simon's attitude. (4) He simply laments how time passes so quickly. (5) He foresees his own future in Simon's altered physicality. (6) He regrets that he took a job from Simon. All of these feelings have the possibility of being in the poet's mind, but it is also possible that none of these match his inner state.

The complexity lies in the fact that, if Simon became upset and refused the offer of the poet's help, it might still have made the poet sad or uncomfortable. In circumstances like this one, there might be a hidden expectation of the positive response of potential receivers in the givers' mind. This shows us that our kind behaviour towards other people does not necessarily prompt complete satisfaction or comfort in the mind of either the giver or the receiver. In addition, Simon's tears of gratitude should not necessarily be interpreted in the context of already-established beliefs, such as the importance of gratitude, which is often taught in moral education classes. The situation in which Simon receives the offer of other people's help means that he *has to* accept the fact that he is not able to perform the task himself any more, which is a severe reality for him. From this poem, the students realized that it is tricky to seek the stereotypical reaction or positive attitude towards kind behaviour; herein is one example of the complexity of the feelings of human beings. There is no strict discipline or moralistic message in this context and for that reason, this poem is worth reading closely.

## 2. Life and Death in 'We Are Seven'

'We Are Seven' consists of a conversation between the poet and a little cottage girl who is eight years old. The poet asks the girl how many sisters and brothers she has and where they live. The girl answers that she has six siblings and that two of them are lying in the church graveyard. The poet tells her that the number should be five in total if two of them lie in the graveyard, but she still insists that 'we are seven' because she often spends time knitting 'my stockings there' (41) and 'my 'kerchief' (42) near her siblings' grave, sitting and singing to them. The poet tries to teach her that the number should be five, but his efforts are in vain. Their conversation remains as disconnected as ever and there is no hint of further progress.

This poem urges us to reconsider the definition of life and death, or the connection between one's physical existence and the recognition of the meaning of existence. The students in the British literature class offered several topics for discussion in this regard: (1) What is the best answer the poet could give the girl in this context? (2) In case some children respond to the death of their beloved ones like this girl, should adults teach them the meaning of lying in graveyards, or should they stop arguing with them about this circumstance? Some said that the girl's way of thinking should be valued and others insisted that a girl of eight years old should recognize the meaning of biological death. It is also possible for adults to simply change the subject at the moment when the topic emerges in a discussion and instead wait for the girl to understand the fact by herself through her experiences later in life, though for some students, it seemed deceitful that adults would avoid serious conversation about important things with the girl. No correct answer exists for this question, even if adults are forced to somehow respond to the girl's words, because a person's response is contingent on what that particular individual thinks regarding the meaning of the condition of 'being alive' as well as in terms of how adults should teach children about death. However, it is effective to discuss the dilemma, as it prompts one to consider different views of life and death and what distinguishes them as well as whether it is meaningful to tell the girl about death in the first place if she does not have any ideas about death itself.

This theme is also closely related to the history or evolution of the concept of children, which has always been affected by the social values of each time period. In his 'My heart leaps up when I behold', Wordsworth sings that 'The Child is Father of the Man' (7). This idea reflects the rapid change of people's attitudes towards children in the Romantic period: the new concept of children, in which they should be regarded as innocent creatures and should therefore be perceived as the model of how human beings should be in this world, because they are spared of any social experiences, ideology-related disciplines, and biased

ideas of successful life in adulthood. This sounds idealistic on the one hand, but at the same time prompts a complicated question related to the definition of education as well as the emergence of further topics for discussion: Do we need education? This also leads to the currently controversial question related to making moral education compulsory and establishing standardisations for assessment in Japanese schools. The students in the British literature class realized the difficulty in giving the same single value to each child regardless of various aspects of our daily lives. Moralistic views change constantly according to the political and cultural situation of each country in each period, thus, as some students insisted, it is perhaps better to recognize that there is no universal truth for people who live in human society and who share the restricted common values of a specific group in their communities.

### **3. Bereavement and What 'Lucy Gray' Tells Us**

The conclusion of a story is not always happy. 'Lucy Gray' begins with the legendary story of a girl who is a devoted daughter to her parents. One day, she meets with an untimely death by straying into a blizzard after going to town to help her parents. It is a tragic death that was caused by a natural disaster. The problem and topic for discussion is: whether it is possible to define the meaning of an untimely death such as this one because, although there was no detailed description about her parents' feelings after they found their daughter's footprints, which vanished in front of the bridge over a stream, some students voiced the expectation that they will blame themselves for the rest of their lives for sending their beloved child into the blizzard. Continuing to blame someone, including themselves, might give further meaning to the reason it happened, and finding someone or something that they can blame might give them comfort. The discussion continues to the next question: Is there, by any chance, something which should be blamed for this kind of accident? Why do the parents need something to reproach? One of the students said that there was no 'untimely' death in the first place. He said that it sounded a bit discriminatory for us to use the word 'untimely' when we talk about the deaths of infants or children but not for the elderly. Another student also insisted that no one can determine the meaning of the word 'untimely' and, if it was established, the parents would lament the death of their child but they would not need to assume the blame for their deeds because it was an accident. The strange thing is, other students said, that it would cause greater agony for the parents if they were obliged to accept the 'accidentalness' because there would be no room for an explanation nor any meaning assigned to the event. This view leads to the idea of 'crass casualty' which Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) internalized in his novels in the 19th century.<sup>3</sup>

The poet in 'Lucy Gray' concludes with a different perspective:

Yet some maintain that to this day  
She is a living Child,  
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray  
Upon the lonesome Wild.

O'er rough and smooth she trips along,  
And never looks behind;  
And sings a solitary song  
That whistles in the wind. (57-64)

In another of Wordsworth's poems, we find that infants' deaths are interpreted in a different way. In 'Three years she grew up in sun and shower', Wordsworth refers to 'Nature' and sings as follows:

Then Nature said, 'A lovelier flower  
On earth was never sown;  
This Child I to myself will take,  
She shall be mine, and I will make  
A Lady of my own. (2-6)

If human beings are nurtured in Nature's bosom, there is no need to find someone to blame, the poet sings, which leads readers to the acceptance of sadness and revulsion towards irrational happenings. By holding this view, one could derive meaning from the girl's death, although there is no exemplary answer and it is natural for us to face the hidden and dark aspects of our feelings.

## Conclusion

Most people recognize the importance of sharing the diverse aspects of human beings and accepting different ways of thinking. However, it is often difficult to expand diverse ideas in actual classes because of limited time in the schedule and the fixed nature of the curriculum. In that sense, more attention should be paid to the effects of reading literary works or the end goal of teaching literature in the first place; discussion on the topics of poems is particularly effective because they possess in exhaustible sources of interpretation and we

are able to arouse the distant memory of our own experiences, which are the very first step towards understanding views that differ from our own. We also have access to the original words and expressions of almost all authors as we see in the above examples, so we do not need to adopt purposefully adapted textbooks. If we seek to establish more effective methods of improving students' ability to express themselves or encourage them to think creatively, reading various kinds of works, articles, comics, all of which should be the original versions, and discussing the topics that students offer as a result could be effective because resolutions to the questions and topics are not required.

To establish these methods, it is important to share the presupposition that it is impossible for both teachers and students to maintain a completely objective view, and this includes the manner in which they choose the topics of discussion. As teachers and students are human beings, it is unavoidable for them to reflect their own values in their choice and opinions, which are based on their experiences. Although this sounds paradoxical, understanding the subjectivity of each of us is an essential point that will lead to tolerance, and at the same time, is the best way for us to accept our respective differences.

## Notes

- 1 Respecting individual values is also included in the recent declaration of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to change the guidelines of teaching methods for various subjects. They have raised the awareness of the importance of improving the problem-solving ability of students of all grades in schools. The most remarkable change is that students are more likely to be required to answer the questions regarding any subject in their own words. This means that the MEXT persuades school teachers to assess the process of students' creative thinking. As such, at least one policy should be shared among both students and teachers: Every single activity of the students towards defining or making meaning of things or events should be accepted, and they should not be manipulated by any kind of purposeful suppression.
- 2 Stephen Gill ed, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford: OUP, 1984)88. All further references appear in the text.
- 3 As for the basic information about Thomas Hardy's themes of his fictions, see *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy* by J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1986) and *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy* edited by Dale Kramer (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

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