

**FORTITUDE IN WORDSWORTH'S POEMS:  
"MICHAEL", "RESOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE"  
AND " THE THORN"**

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**Abstract**

William Wordsworth is known as a poet of Nature but he aspired to be a philosophical poet, whose major subject is man, "speaking to men in the language of men." This aspiration is born inside him as he realizes the necessity to discuss essential human issues as part of his duty as a didactic poet.

Fortitude is among the themes that he tackles to teach man how to show courage against obstacles and impediments and live happily.

The study sheds light on this theme in three of his major poems. In each one the sufferer shows fortitude because it is part of his aim to achieve continuity in life as in "Michael", or because it is part of his firmness of mind as in "Resolution and Independence" or because it is a necessity of existence as in "The Thorn".

**1- Introduction**

In 1798 William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge published the outcome of their collaboration *The Lyrical Ballads*. Thereupon it has become a beam of great momentousness to the dawn of the Romantic Movement. As regards this paper *The Lyrical Ballads* is significant as it proclaims the birth of both the poetic career of William Wordsworth and his being a moral poet.

In his preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth denounces the insensibility and superficiality of

poetry when it merely tells stories or be descriptive. He affirms that each of his poems in *The Lyrical Ballads* "has a worthy purpose."<sup>1</sup> This affirmation finds its embodiment in his poetry whether in *The Lyrical Ballads* or in his later work. He crowns this affirmation a few years later when he says in a letter to one of his friends that:

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Every great poet is a teacher: I wish either to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing.... There is scarcely one of my poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment or to some general principle, or law of thought or of our intellectual constitution.<sup>2</sup>

This conviction in the necessity of interweaving two tasks; teaching and poetic composition, is burgeoned in Wordsworth's mind because of a "sense of guilt arising from childhood incidents," the disillusionment after the failure of the French Revolution to reform the human society, "The critical

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone

Housed in a dream, at distance from the kind<sup>4</sup>

Among the moral sentiments that his poetic vocation inspires him to teach to humanity is fortitude.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,

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Not without hope we suffer and we mourn<sup>5</sup>.

He aims to teach his readers how to endure human suffering, how to draw from predicaments strength and how to perpetuate solidarity despite all the deprivation and weakness. *The Lyrical Ballads* proclaims this aim. In it he presents human tales about the tribulations of life suggesting that "life was to be endured, --- and if it was to be endured the solidarity of mankind must be maintained."<sup>6</sup>

years in the tremendous struggle between England and Napoleonic Europe and the shock caused by the death of his brother John."<sup>3</sup> All these disappointments are elements that accentuate his feeling of a poetic vocation and make him abandon poetic aloofness and announce:

Wordsworth hails this moral strength, saying:

In a nutshell, "The question of suffering [touches] Wordsworth closely."<sup>7</sup> His answer is fortitude. But what are the powers, in Wordsworth's attitude, that inspire man to endure and to surmount suffering?

Concerning the scope of the poems chosen in this study the sufferers show amazing courage

despite the opposing circumstances and

the heavy burden of loss and pain:

----- that consolation springs,  
From sources deeper far than deepest pain,  
For the meek sufferers,<sup>8</sup>

The sufferers of the *Lyrical Ballads* that show fortitude are simple Country people; decrepit men, derelict women, children, shepherds, beggars and tramps. He chooses them because "The French Revolution taught [him ] that every human being was intrinsically great ." <sup>9</sup> And because in his own perspective "Low and rustic life"<sup>10</sup> are examples of "maturity." And fortitude is an evidence of maturity.

They have innate "sturdy independence, the habit of silence and solitude, the capacity for long unspeaking sorrow"<sup>10</sup> and these are different facets of the ideal of fortitude.

Moreover they live in the bosom of nature "and Nature befriends them,"<sup>11</sup> consoles and compensates them whether as a spiritual power, being a revelation of God on earth, or as a source of beauty:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, <sup>13</sup>

Wordsworth assures whether explicitly or implicitly throughout the three poems that fortitude is shown once there is unity correlating man and nature. For nature not only embroiders man's surroundings but also defines

and crystalises man's actions and character.

Sometimes he presents Nature to represent the two faces of the coin. On the one hand, he presents nature as one source of the sufferer's suffering,

in Crehan's words, "a frightening force." And on the other hand he presents it as the sufferer's source of courage, also in Crehan's words, "an influence for good"<sup>14</sup> to maintain fortitude for instance. He believes that Nature teaches man moral lessons.<sup>15</sup>

## 2- Fortitude as Poetically Enacted In Wordsworth's Three Poems

The three poems of this study are among his major ones that have different tales relating man's manifestation of fortitude against all kinds of hostile forces.

In this respect "Michael" (1800) is a tale of fortitude against the forces of time and decay. Michael is a simple man, an aged shepherd, about eighty four. He finds himself threatened by dotage and consequently death. However, he struggles to maintain continuity aided by his physical strength. He was:

An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb.

His bodily frame had been from youth to age of unusual strength.<sup>16</sup>

This enables him to climb the craggy mountains and continue doing his daily tasks with "endless industry". Furthermore, Geoffrey Durrant perceives in Michael "an elemental

dignity"<sup>17</sup> that is found in shepherds living in solitude which elevates him more and strengthens him to show fortitude. Above all, Micheal is able to endure because:

There is a comfort in the strength of love:  
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else  
would upset the brain, or break the  
heart: (p.102)

Michael loves nature; the air, the hills, the mountains, the cottage and the fields. With them he finds "Courage and joy". Another kind of love is born, that is his only son Luke: "He was [Michael's] comfort and his daily hope". (P.99)

He lives in austere conditions: "With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and Kites" (P.97)

Then he is threatened to lose his "patrimonial fields" because of a debt. Therefore his only object of hope to maintain continuity is Luke.

----- Among the rocks

He went, and still looked up to sun and cloud,  
And listened to the wind; and, as before,  
Performed all kinds of labour for his sheep, and  
For the land, his small inheritance (P. 102)

He loses the son, the land and he has already lost his youth. He is, Durrant argues, "a heroic figure"<sup>19</sup> because he employs every possible means to surmount suffering with sheer "silent undemonstrativeness."<sup>20</sup>

He continues building his other object of hope, the sheepfold, which he starts to build when he resolves to send the apple of his eye, Luke, to the city. He faces courageously the collapse of his hopes and his grief until he himself

What aggravates the suffering is that after having sent Luke to the city to work and improve the finances of the family Michael receives painfully the sad tidings of Luke's degeneration and eventually escape to another country.

Against all this Michael acts heroically when he "sticks to life even after he has nothing to live for."<sup>18</sup>

Therefore one can see that:

collapses: "And never lifted up a single stone." (P. 103)

Michael dies seven years after Luke's dissolution. Isabel, Michael's wife, passes away three years after him and the land, which he loves dearly, goes to another owner. That is, man and his aspirations to continue and the achievements that represent this aspiration collapse. The only thing that endures is "the unfinished sheepfold" which is transformed into shapelessness by the stream, a symbol

of “the force of time”<sup>21</sup> and: “In all the neighbourhood ... the oak is left” (p. 103) to echo the fact that “the natural world ,the rocks, the trees, the hills ... simply endures, life [prevails]”<sup>22</sup>.

The leech gatherer in “Resolution and Independence” (1802 – 1807), with his fortitude, firmness of mind and resolution is a far starker example of fortitude than Michael. Wordsworth excels in making the story of the decrepit man, the leech gatherer, with its moral significance, a medicament to the ached souls and minds with the worries of harvesting “grains for the garner of future days.” Such was the leech gatherer once to Wordsworth himself at one time.<sup>23</sup>

To me that morning did it happen so;  
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;  
Dim sadness. And blind thoughts, I knew  
not, nor could name. (IV, 108)

Wordsworth is separated from the joviality of the universe. The joy that he perceives in nature burdens his mind with fears of the secrets of the future. The happiness that he witnesses now makes him ponder: “But there may come another day to me – / Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.” (V, 108)

“Resolution and Independence” begins with lively images of nature when it is at its best: Full of vigour and vitality after a rainy and a stormy night. The sunshine embraces the moor; the grass and the animals livening them up with, as it were, the joy of being alive. The hare is jumping merrily, the skies are echoing the warbling of the birds and the rain-drops glitter on the grass. Such is the moor upon which Wordsworth is a traveller. The fauna and flora of this moor manifest the happiness of the universe. This must be more than enough to make the poet jovial. But he finds himself drowned in his “dejection”:

All these possibly coming aches, he broods, may lead him to “despondency and madness.” And such was the end of poets like Chatterton and Burns who passed away poor and in the prime of their lives. He believes that every poet “must if he is to pursue his vocation avoid being absorbed in “getting and spending.” He reflects that “the pursuit of gain” and “the demands

of ordinary existence”<sup>24</sup> may deter his poetic task. These worries, which echo everyman's perplexity and suffering, make him tread on the moor, full of depression and hence secluded from the joviality around.

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie  
and  
like a sea – beast crawled forth, ... (IX, 108)

The leech gatherer is entwined with nature though he is not “exempted from the burden of suffering... he has been subjected to the full weight of the natural law, and to everything that pain, or rage of sickness can do.”<sup>25</sup> This is well shown in his gray hair and

--- he had many hardships to endure:  
From pond to pond he roamed, from moor to  
moor;  
Housing, with God's good help. By choice or  
chance;  
And in this way he gained an honest maintenance. (XV, 109)

This solemn acceptance of “hardships” and most precisely this fortitude transforms the leech gatherer in the poet's eyes into “a prophet and mysterious being speaking ... for man in his search for fortitude.”<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the decrepit's fortitude is,

All of a sudden the poet becomes aware of the presence of an old and grizzled leech gatherer “emergent from the rock” united and part of nature itself and does not feel the separation from the surroundings that Wordsworth senses. He appears:

his bent figure, which leans on a staff of wood with utter perseverance to search for leeches.

The poet converses with the leech gatherer and enquires about the latter's employment. The latter's reply is “feeble” but “lofty” that:

a parable upbraiding the poet for his depression and endowing him with “a human strength”. However Wordsworth soon sinks in his perplexity and anxiety about the daily cares and asks the leech gatherer:

“How is it that you live, and what is it you do?” (XVII, 109)

The above given question voices Wordsworth's wonder at such fortitude. And the leech gatherer's comment is that though the leeches are rare at such times he determines never

to give up searching. His poise, firmness of mind and resolution enable the leech gatherer to endure courageously and make him appear stately. Such fortitude makes Wordsworth despise himself and plead to God and whisper:

“God” said I, “be my help and stay secure:  
I'll think of the leech gatherer on the lonely  
moor!” (XX, 109)

The insuperable fortitude of the leech gatherer, Wordsworth aims to show, is a symbol of the greatness of the human soul that can save every man from the anxiety of worldly cares and suffering.

The third poem “The Thorn” presents another chapter of fortitude against human suffering in a life devoid of social and human justice. This time Wordsworth relies heavily on symbols more than he does in the

A wretched thing forlorn.  
It stands erect, and like a stone  
with lichens is it overgrown.<sup>27</sup>

And it is hard: “Like rock or stone, it is o'ergrown” (I, II, 1)

Hence the erectness and the solidarity of the thorn is defying the

The second emblem is that of: “... a little muddy pond /  
of water .. never dry” (III, 1)

two previous poems. The symbols signify the fortitude and the suffering in this tale.

He introduces his ballad, "The Thorn", with three symbols from nature that are emblems of endurance and resilience. The first is that of an “aged thorn” which is delineated by a narrator to be:

mosses that conspire to drag the thorn  
and bury it for good.



It is so though it has been subject to the blazing sun and the “parching air”. Thus “the little muddy pond” echos the resilience of the little thorn which is showing “stubborn and

A beauteous heap, a hill of moss,  
Just half a foot in height.  
All lovely colours there you see, (IV, 2)

From the three quoted extracts mentioned above of “The Thorn” that portray the thorn, the pond and the heap, one can deduce that they are designated by “smallness and helplessness.”<sup>29</sup> The thorn is as long as two years’ infant, the pond is little and the heap is akin to a grave of a child. These relatively diminutive symbols pave the way for the story of the dead born or the murdered infant of the persecuted woman, Martha Ray.

Martha Ray lives near those resilient natural beings and as they do, she struggles against her grave pain lamenting “Oh misery! Oh misery!”

Akin to the three natural beings, Martha Ray in her dereliction and solitariness endures the suffering produced by the hostile nature exemplified by “The whirlwind” and “The frosty air” for twenty years.

Similarly for the same twenty years she has to show fortitude being a

unobtrusive” resilience against “persecution and misery.”<sup>28</sup>

With the third emblem the suggestion of fortitude against misery is further enhanced for it is this time:

miserable and wretched suspect whose judgement is suspended because of the “absence of proof.”<sup>30</sup>

Having fallen in love with Stephen Hill, Martha Ray is inflicted by his desertion and his marriage to another girl. Six months later it proves that she has a child by him but gruesomely it is never seen.

Since then she has become a subject to the torture of malevolent forces of the villagers slights and unproved accusations, the pricks of conscience of her guilt and the suffering of being abandoned in severe nature. She endures her misery and keeps on climbing to reach the mountain’s peak.

The villagers with their blunt daggers of accusations assert that she is guilty of this gruesome crime, murdering the infant.

However the gorgeous mound of mosses is part of the hearsay to be a

grave of the dead infant. At the same time the mound is a tinge of balm that fortifies Martha Ray in her wretchedness. It is so if we consider Albert S. Gerard's penetration into the significance of the mound. He argues that the beautiful heap is "an image of

tenderness to man. For one thing, its luscious colours certainly tone down the horror of the woman's predicament: there is nothing lurid about the infant's grave."<sup>31</sup>

Adding to this is the narrator's sympathetic way of relating the story:

"I've heard, the moss is spotted red  
With drops of that poor infant's blood;  
But kill a new – born infant thus,  
I do not think she could!  
Some say, if to the pond you go,  
And fix on it a steady view,  
The shadow of a babe you trace. (XX, 5)

With expressions as "I've heard", "I do not think" and "some say" he vindicates Martha Ray. In other words their accusations seem to be voiced by this sympathetic narrator

as part of the hallucination of unfair tattlers.

Eventually nature rescues the woman and her endangered fortitude when the villagers came as maniacs:

With spades they would have sought.  
But instantly the hill of moss  
Before their eyes began to stir!  
And, for full fifty yards around,  
The grass... it shook upon the ground! (XXI, 5)

With this cleavage of the grass Martha Ray's lamentation "Oh woe is me! Oh misery" is saved and it remains always to arise from the abyss of her suffering as a cry of fortitude.

The cruelty and malevolence that she encountered were unable to silence her. Her cry will always proclaim that she is the unshushed victim of hostility.

### 3- Conclusion

The stoic ideal of fortitude is one of the many ideals that nature inspires Wordsworth to preach. He succeeds to transfer to us his conviction that there are three main streams that enrich the reservoir of fortitude in man's heart ; nature , love and the strong will. For in " Michael" fortitude springs from Michael's love of nature and his family, and his inherent courage as an individual. In

"Resolution and Independence" the leech gatherer's innate strength charges him to overcome the hindering predicament of life and nature aids him in his pursuit for living. In " The Thorn" the beautiful nature soothes Martha Ray and eventually intervenes to save her from the hostility of the society. Hence enables her to show fortitude.

Finally, according to Wordsworth it is fortitude that creates out of the simple and wretched figures of the above mentioned poems model heroes for his readers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Wordsworth, "Extracts from the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 and 1802), in *Wordsworth Lyrical Ballads* ed. Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1972), P. 36.

<sup>2</sup>Cited in R. O. C. Winkler, "Wordsworth's Poetry," *The Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Blake to Byron.* 5 (London: Penguin England Books Ltd., 1967), P. 155.

<sup>3</sup>*Notes on Wordsworth* (Toronto: Coles Publishing Company, 1966), P. 40.

His sense of guilt might also be burgeoned after his desertion of Annette Vallon whom he loved in France.

Though she had a child by him, he had to leave her in 1793. He is summoned by his uncles to return to England and on them he was financially dependent.

<sup>4</sup>Cited in J. R. Watson, *English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789-1830* (London: Longman Group limited, 1985), P. 147.

<sup>5</sup>I bid.

<sup>6</sup>Geoffrey Durrant, *William Wordsworth*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), P. 15.

<sup>7</sup>T.Crehan ed. "Introduction," to *The Poetry of Wordsworth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), P. 20.

<sup>8</sup>I bid.

<sup>9</sup> S. K. Mukherjee, *William Wordsworth* ( New Delhi: Rama brothers India pvt. LTD., 2005),p.59.

<sup>10</sup>Jones and Tydeman. P. 35.

<sup>11</sup>Helen Darbishire, *Wordsworth* (London: Longmans Group LTD, 1958), P.23.

<sup>12</sup>I bid., P. 26.

In his poetry Wordsworth emphasizes "unity between man and Nature."

<sup>13</sup>I bid.

<sup>14</sup>Crehan, P43.

<sup>15</sup>Mukherjee,p.67.

<sup>16</sup>All quotations of William Wordsworth's Poetry are taken from:

Oscar James Campbell and J. F. Pyre Ed. *Poetry and Criticism of the Romantic Movement* (London: Appleton – century Crofts, Inc., 1932), P.97.

Otherwise the source is stated.

<sup>17</sup>Durrant, P. 76.

<sup>18</sup>John W. Elliott, *The Poetry of William Wordsworth* (New York: Monarch Press, 1965), P. 55.

It is the city this "dissolute" place with its urbanity and moral changes that "ruined" Luke and Michael's "whole family and heritage."

<sup>19</sup>Durrant, P. 78.

<sup>20</sup>Winkler, P. 183.

<sup>21</sup>Durrant, P. 82.

<sup>22</sup>Winkler, P. 183

<sup>23</sup>Elliott, PP. 56, 57.

"Wordsworth's sister Dorothy records in her journal the meeting with the old leech – gatherer who is the subject of this poem ---- [He was] an old man --- his wife had borne him ten children, all of them were dead now except one who was a sailor; --- his trade was to gather leeches, but now leeches were scarce and he had no strength for it .... He lived by begging"; "He had been hurt in driving a cart"; "He felt no pain till he recovered from his first insensibility".

<sup>24</sup>Durrant, PP. 91, 92.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., P. 93.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., P.97.

<sup>27</sup>All quotations of Wordsworth's poem "The Thorn" are taken from On line <http://web.Bartteby.com/www/html>. P.1.

<sup>28</sup>Albert S. Gérard, "Of Trees and Men: The Unity of Wordsworth's 'The Thorn,'" in *Wordsworth Lyrical Ballads*, Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman ed. (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1972), P.221.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., P.222.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., P.228.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., P.225-226.

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## الجلد في قصائد لوردس ورث: " مايكل" و " التصميم و الأستقلال" و " شجرة الزعرور".

الأستاذ المساعد هدى عباس هاشم  
كلية التربية للبنات - قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

### خلاصة

يعرف الشاعر وليم وردس ورث بكونه شاعر الطبيعة الا أنه كان يطمح أن يكون شاعرا فلسفيا موضوعه الرئيس الأنسان " مخاطبا الناس بلغتهم" . ولد هذا الألموح في نفس الشاعر حين بدأ يدرك ضرورة مناقشته لقضايا انسانية كجزء من واجبه باعتباره شاعر تعليمي .

إن موضوع الجلد هو إحد المواضيع التي يتناولها وردس ورث ليعلم الناس كيفية اظهار الشجاعه ازاء العوائق والعقبات و العيش بسعادة. تسلط الدراسة ضوءا على هذا الموضوع في ثلاث قصائد بارزة له. في كل واحدة من هذه القصائد يظهر الشخص جلدا أما لكون الجلد هذا جزءاً من هدفه في مواصلة الحياة كما في " مايكل " أ و لإن الجلد جزءا من عزمته كما في قصيدة " التصميم والإستقلال " أو لكون الجلد جزءا من ضرورات الوجود كما في قصيدة " شجرة الزُعرور " .