

Undercurrents of the River Duddon: Human Consciousness versus Nature

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Abstract. This essay examines the relationship between human consciousness and nature in William Wordsworth's "The River Duddon" sonnets. By adapting the method of literary analysis, Wordsworth's portrayal of the River Duddon serves as a lens through which the boundaries of human understanding are examined, illustrating an unbridgeable gap between human consciousness and nature. After a brief introduction of research background, this essay elaborates on the River Duddon's unattainable origin as cloud's child in deferral to both antiquity and industry, eco-Gothic wilderness in departure and return pattern, and nonperishable eternity compared with the transience of human. By deconstructing anthropocentric views prevalent in Romantic literature, the research emphasizes the urgent necessity of acknowledging nature's subjectivity and its independent existence beyond human perception. This essay not only revitalizes the poetic landscape of Wordsworth but also advocates for a non-human turn in literary criticism, promoting ecological awareness and respect for nature.

1 Introduction

Romanticism has often been defined by such moments of idealistic reverie of humanism, in which human consciousness 'becomes one' with nature in one way or another. Some scholars argue that nature is a concept that must be understood and perceived through the filter of culture and ideology, among which the most radical one claims that "there is no nature" [1]. Therefore, in the light of humanism, nature often did not exist independently of the Romantic poets themselves, e.g., as a close friend, a refuge, or a moral guide.

However, as humanism undergoes deconstruction, anthropocentrism is challenged, prompting a reevaluation of Romantic poetry, a manifesto of the humanism era. Scholars have realized that the previous conventional framing has often limited the scope of literary analysis to a narrow interpretation of Romanticism. In recent studies, the spontaneity and autonomy of nature have gained increasingly significance, reshaping the understanding of literary expressions and their relationship with the natural world.

With regard to romantic poets, William Wordsworth is considered as the vitally leading poet of Romanticism. In his famous *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, he claims that "Poetry is the image of man and nature." As Hartman argues repeatedly, it was necessary for Wordsworth always to "personify nature" [2]. It is obvious to list his profound exploration of the tight

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relationship between nature and the human spirit. However, tracing the ongoing deconstruction of humanism, there are moments in Wordsworth's writing where, for human consciousness and particularly, the River Duddon, to stand at the boundaries of understanding of the human. The boundaries that Wordsworth primarily has revealed is that of an unbridgeable gap between nature and human consciousness.

By adapting the method of literary analysis to re-integrating "The River Duddon", a series of sonnets by William Wordsworth, this research selects four of the most representative sonnets in the series and examines them through tense, space, persona and narrative techniques. This research not only revolutionizes the poetic landscape by William Wordsworth but also challenges the anthropocentric perspectives of Romantic time, encouraging a deeper understanding of ecological awareness and respect for nature's autonomy. On a broader scale, this research shatters the utopian fantasy of human beings about the natural environment and forces a rethinking of human's place and role in nature. This not only endows nature with subjectivity and breaks the mindset of objectifying nature but also responds to the call for a non-human turn and completes the deconstruction of social construction and human exceptionalism in the contemporary context.

2 Background of the River Duddon

William Wordsworth was a pioneering figure in Romantic poetry, famous for his deep passion for nature and his innovative poetic vision. His poetry often celebrates the beauty and sublimity of natural landscapes, depicting them as repositories of wisdom and moral lessons. Numerous scholars have introspected his poems concerning nature, such as M.H. Abraham and Jonathan Bate. Despite writing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Wordsworth's poems display a deep ecological awareness. His key poems like "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" and "The Prelude" exemplify his deep engagement with nature and its transformative power.

As early as Elizabethan times, topographical writing had taken the rivers of England as an obvious and plausible "natural symbol" [3]. In William Wordsworth's poetry, rivers often serve as powerful natural symbols that embody various themes and concepts central to his Romantic vision. This thesis chooses "The River Duddon" series sonnets. Although popular in Wordsworth's lifetime, The River Duddon sonnets have been neglected by modern readers [4]. Robinson has recently summarized critical views of The River Duddon as "a conventionally didactic loco-descriptive poem" [5]. Nevertheless, such views overlook the deeper significance of The River Duddon in Wordsworth's later reflections on the relationship between human consciousness and nature, far from being merely didactic or descriptive.

Paul Fry points out that nature might be "grey rather than green, inert and inimical to consciousness, rather than open to and productive of it" [6]. This re-interpretation of The River Duddon can not only refresh the understanding of nature and human consciousness but also encourage a humble approach to human ideology with nature.

3 Unattainable origin

Traditionally, the "naturalness" of rivers is often associated with "anthropocentric connotations of civilizational felicity" [7]. Rivers are considered to be one of the indispensable conditions for the construction of ancient culture. The origin of rivers, therefore, is often examined within the context of human civilizations.

Nevertheless, in the River Duddon series, Wordsworth fails to find traces of Duddon's origin. As Daniel Robinson points out, the mortal wanderer cannot follow the river into the

ocean and must turn to retrace the journey to its origin. In so doing, Wordsworth sees Duddon still extends from its source [5].

Wordsworth traces the growth of the river from its cloud-surrounded birth till it merges with the ocean and sinks into a "powerless sleep." This panoramic point of view enables the poet to avoid taking a single point of vantage as a detached observer and permits him likewise to avoid identifying himself with the river in the pilgrim-style tracing journey. This point of view, as well as the eternal power of water over the mind of human, poetically articulate the thesis: the River Duddon exists in a realm apart from human concerns and consciousness.

In Sonnet 2, the beginning line directly describes the origin of the river Duddon, which is beyond human touch. The river's birth, depicted as "Child of the clouds" [8], evokes a sense of mysticism and wonder, inviting readers to perceive the river not only as a physical entity but also as a spiritual channel connecting the terrestrial and celestial space. This transcendent perspective encourages a deeper exploration of human connection with the larger cosmos, fostering a sense of wonder and humility in the face of nature's vastness.

In Sonnet 3, the origin of the River Duddon is again emphasized to bestow anti-anthropocentric dualism: on the one hand, "hoar Antiquity's esteem" [8] makes no appearance when the river originates; on the other hand, "none of modern Fortune" [8] enchants its birth.

The vacancy of "hoar Antiquity's esteem" indicates the river duddon's humbleness. Although the river may not have been celebrated or cared for in the past by great historical figures ("hoar Antiquity"), it still holds its own intrinsic allure and natural beauty. The "brilliant moss" in the next line hints at a natural adornment, untouched by human but admired for its own organic splendor. It celebrates nature's ability to shine in its own right and exist as a part of the earth, independent of human recognition or intervention.

The denial of "modern fortune" reflects natural resistance to human power. Although Wordsworth certainly notices the gradual industrial damage of the landscape during his times, in the River Duddon sonnets, he does not pay extra attention to such unpleasant changes in the river; instead, he focuses on harmonious pastoral landscapes or those that have retained natural wilderness. The River Duddon embodies an idealized state of nature, untouched by the corruptions of modernity and industry. This remoteness serves as a stark contrast to the pervasive influence of industrialization, which often pollutes and alters natural landscapes irreversibly. Therefore, the act of returning to an unknown and untraceable origin of the river and finding it still essentially intact provides Wordsworth with an opportunity to meditate on how human consciousness responds to the natural world.

Above all, the origin of the River Duddon provides justification for the gap between nature and human consciousness: It does not depend on the human will to be born, nor does it need human empowerment.

4 Eco-phobic Wilderness

Mekusick points out that many of Wordsworth's poems have "an underlying narrative of departure and return" [9]. This pattern is illustrated in the River Duddon series. The poet embarks on an imaginative track to trace the origin of Duddon, as mentioned in section 1.

However, since Sonnet 13, the poet temporarily returns to the human world, "turn into port" [8], and "laugh with the generous household" [8]. This return is triggered by roaring wind and "angry" Duddon. In Gothic ecology, non-human material energies like the River Duddon are always irresistibly "preventing or hindering human intentions and plans" [10], which invites "contempt and fear of natural energies", i.e. "ecophobia". Ecophobia is rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism [11]. What Gothic Ecology

seeks to expose is precisely the alienation of man from nature and the uneasiness, anxiety and fear that arise in the process.

Wordsworth, in this sonnet, is not the average observer; his response to the Duddon derives from a far more primordial human set of instinctive responses involving fear, reverie, and suppressed curiosity about what will emerge just beyond the "angry" currents. If his departure from the human world indicates the attempt to search and frame Duddon in the human context in the beginning sonnet, this retreat back to safe household signals a more dreadful natural power, which is beyond human consciousness to grasp. Therefore, the image of the River Duddon is enriched from an indifferent representation of natural rules to an Eco-Gothic and even Eco-phobic existence.

In Sonnet 14, *The River Duddon*, different from the benevolent guide or escapist shelter common in Romantic poems, flows indifferently as the uncontrollable existence in contrast with the often chaotic, fraught existence of humanity, as if being impelled by "some awful Spirit" [8] to leave behind "the haunts of men" [8]. The "awful Spirit" here is a foreshadowing of the following "Dance, like a Bacchanal" (Sonnet 20), which foreshadows a departure from the religious images worshiped in the humanist era to primordial religion during this interval, the poet's reflections upon paganism emphasize the primitive ancientness of the river.

In the next line, "through this wilderness a passage cleave" [8], the word "wilderness" is noteworthy. Wilderness derives from the Anglo-Saxon "wilddere", where "deore" or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation [2]. This "wilderness", unlike the serene Lake District, which provides escaping shelter and moral guidance, is beyond the boundaries of human civilization. This untamed realm evokes deep-seated anxieties about confronting the primal and uncharted aspects of nature, embodying primordial fears of the unknown and underscoring the divide between nature and human consciousness.

This Gothic version of the River Duddon re-encodes the concept of romantic and green nature, highlighting its uncanny, violent and horrible aspects. The traditional "nature" concept elaborated in Romanticism analysis ignores the horrors of nature by praising its beauty and emphasizing its link to human consciousness.

Above all, the eco-Gothic narrative of the River Duddon not only gives nature subjectivity by breaking the mindset of objectifying nature and exposing the anxiety and panic of human beings in nature but also forces human beings to rethink their association with nature, acknowledges their animal instincts and natural attributes, and therefore completes the deconstruction of anthropomorphism.

5 Nonperishable eternity

Geoffrey Hartman reads the last sonnet, "After-thought" as a deferral to the eternal power of nature: "Nature outlives man and will continue to inspire him" [12]. This outliving eternity is a momentum for the vivid distinction between the River Duddon and humanity.

In the last Sonnet After-Thought, the transition of personal pronouns is noteworthy. Personal pronouns in this poem can be roughly divided into four categories, including first-person singular, first-person plural, second person and third-person.

With regard to first-person pronouns, first-person singular (I, my) reflects an individual and introspective experience, while first-person plural (we, us, our) suggests a collective experience or a shared sentiment, expanding the perspective from individual to communal. This shift indicates how individual consciousness expands into human consciousness.

Usage of third-person (it) can denote detachment or otherness; in this case, it refers to the River Duddon. A transition from "I" and "thee" (you) to "It" when discussing the river signifies moving from a personal connection to recognizing the river as an impersonal force,

highlighting its otherness and the gap between human perception (subjective and limited) and the essence of nature (objective and vast).

Second-person “thee”, which means “you” in modern English, is worth more discussion. In the first line, “I thought of Thee/ my partner and my guide”, the word “thee” can refer to two objects, and it both makes sense. The most obvious meaning of the “Thee” he is talking to could be someone considered his partner and someone who teaches him a great deal as a life guide, and the next lines inform the reader that this person has died.

However, when checking the phrase “pass away” in OED, it can also mean “an object to depart, to break away “. Therefore, if “thee” refers to the River Duddon, the notion of the river "being past away" can be understood as a reflection on the passage of time and the inevitable changes this brings since rivers are often symbols of time's flow, ever-moving and ever-changing.

The double elaboration of “thee” implies the tension between human Consciousness and River Duddon. This can evoke feelings of human transience of experience in contrast with the everlasting river, despite the poet’s futile attempt to call the river “partner” and “guide”. It represents a sharp difference, an impassable boundary—the edge of human understanding—where our perceptions and conceptual frameworks fall short.

Lastly, this thesis can be proved by some multiple or literary meanings of words besides “being past away”. For example, in “Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;” [8], the word "Still" can mean 'continuously', which is the objective existence of the river and also 'motionless', which is Wordsworth's subjective description of the river's state of motion. The river's continual flow, despite appearing motionless, metaphorically represents the seamless, ongoing march of time and nature's processes. This is actually beyond human influence and power.

In the next line, “The Form remains, the Function never dies” [8], the two capitalized F is noteworthy. The word “form” reminds readers of the Platonic conception. Forms are the eternal, immutable, and perfect archetypes of all things that exist in the material world. By using "Form," Wordsworth suggests that the physical aspect of the river (its shape, its course) remains constant over time. This Form of the river would be abstract, not subject to the changes and degradation that physical rivers undergo due to environmental factors or human interaction.

The word "Function ", linking with “never die”, stands out against the next line “We Men, who in our morn of youth defied The elements, must vanish;—be it so!”, also suggests a perpetual, ongoing influence, echoing the idea that nature operates on a level of permanence and purpose beyond human consciousness.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis of William Wordsworth's "The River Duddon" sonnets reveals a new perspective on the relationship between human consciousness and nature. Through a close examination of the sonnets, it becomes evident that there is an unbridgeable gap between the two between the lines, suggesting that while humans may attempt to understand and handle nature, their perceptions are actually limited and subjective. This finding, in accordance with a broader literary trend in critiques of anthropocentrism, emphasizing the necessity of recognizing nature's autonomy and interdependent value beyond human interpretation.

The underlying reason for this disconnect may originate from the historical context in which Wordsworth wrote, where the Romantic ideal often romanticized nature while simultaneously imposing human narratives upon it. By deconstructing these narratives, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Wordsworth's work, encouraging

readers to appreciate the complexities of natural existence and the limitations of human understanding.

However, this study also has its limitations. While it successfully highlights the core idea of nature's eternity and human transience in the sonnets, it does not move forward into the socio-political implications of Wordsworth's ecological vision or the potential intersections with contemporary environmental issues. Future research could offer extensive elaborations by examining these aspects and exploring how Wordsworth's reflections resonate with current ecological crises. There is a significant opportunity to further investigate the implications of Wordsworth's work within the context of modern ecological criticism. By bridging the gap between historical literary analysis and contemporary environmental discourse, scholars can enhance our understanding of nature's role in literature and its relevance to today's ecological challenges. Above all, this essay not only revitalizes Wordsworth's poetic landscape but also advocates for a more respectful and conscious relationship with the natural world.

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