

UNIT-4

THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US

William Wordsworth

Structure

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4.0 Introduction

"The World Is Too Much with Us" is a lyrical sonnet written by the great English Romantic poet William Wordsworth. The poem was composed in 1802, when the Industrial Revolution was in full flower. He published it in 1807 as part of a collection, *Poems in Two Volumes*. In this poem, Wordsworth criticises the world of the First Industrial Revolution for being absorbed in materialism and distancing itself from nature. Wordsworth here reflects his view that humanity must get in touch with nature to progress spiritually.

Like most Italian sonnets, its 14 lines are written in iambic pentameter

4.1 Unit Objectives

The objective of this unit/poem is to help the students in understanding the poetic capabilities and deep insight of William Wordsworth a well-known poet of the Romantic Age. The students need to be well versed in understanding William Wordsworth's perception in highlighting the degenerated material distrust of the period.

4.2 About the Poet

A Poet Laureate, William Wordsworth (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850) was a main English Romantic poet who, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

Wordsworth poetry is notable for prominence given to nature and imagination. He called poetry as 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge'. He gave the idea that poetry is a "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquillity".

Wordsworth believed that nature never betrays the heart that loved her and advocated that man should completely submit oneself to the nature. Nature in fact should be the guide and guardian of the human soul. In fact, Wordsworth spiritualised nature and emphasised its moral influence on human beings.

Wordsworth's magnum opus is generally considered to be *The Prelude*, a semi auto biographical poem of his early years that he revised and expanded a number of times. It was posthumously titled and published, before which it was generally known as "the poem to Coleridge". Wordsworth was Britain's Poet Laureate from 1843 until his death from pleurisy on 23 April 1850.

Some of Wordsworth's best known poems include lyrics, odes, sonnets and verse tales. He is known for his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", 'Daffodils', Tintern abbey', 'The Solitary Reaper'.

4.3 About the Poem

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

This poem, exposes the vices of the world and asks the reader to stop and enjoy the beauties of nature, and to take the time to think. William Wordsworth wrote this sonnet when he was 32 years old, in 1802, and published it in 1807. This poem, in fact, was a sincere answer to the fall of the cottage industry and rural way of life, which had been taken over by rising industrialisation. People were no longer in touch with Nature.

The industrial revolution had radically transformed England, Wordsworth was always sensitive to the changes in the nation's consciousness, was disturbed with this development.

In a letter he wrote about '*the decadent material cynicism of the time*' and this sonnet replicates poet's helplessness to set right the disparity between the spiritual and material, Nature and the economy.

When Wordsworth wrote this poem, England was being industrialised at a fast pace. Steam engines were being built for the mines and new railways, factories were being established and large scale industrialisation was taking shape.

The countryside was becoming mechanised. Rural families ended up working in the mills and mines. This was a fast and irrevocable change.

Wordsworth believed that society was hell bent on making and spending money in factories and fast-paced business enterprises completely ignoring the immaculate beauty of nature, which is a manifestation of the celestial.

In an angry tone, the poet reprimands the society for giving preference to worldly things and pleasures. In doing so, people are starving their souls. He further declares that he would rather be a pagan. Then he could appreciate nature through different eyes and even see Proteus rising from the sea.

4.4 Summary

In this poem, Wordsworth in an angry tone accuses the modern man of having lost its connection to nature and to everything meaningful: “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” He says that even when the sea “bares her bosom to the moon” and the winds howl, people are still out of tune, and looks on indifferently at the spectacle of the storm. The poet wishes to be a pagan raised according to a different vision of the world, so that, “standing on this pleasant lea,” he might see images of ancient gods rising from the waves, a sight that would cheer him greatly. He imagines “Proteus rising from the sea,” and Triton “blowing his wreathed horn.”

4.5 Key Terms

Sordid: awful,dissolute

Boon : gift

Howling: expression of grief

Pagan: a person holding religious belief other than Christianity.

Creed : faith,a statement of belief

Lea : an open area of grassy or arable land

Proteus: Greek God of rivers and Oceans.

Triton : The Messenger of the Seas, according to the Greek Mythology.

4.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

1. What does the poet mean by ‘the world is too much with us’?

Ans; It means that we have developed too much love for materialistic things.

2. What are poet’s views about the winds?

Ans: According to the poet the stormy winds are now sleeping like flowers.

3 Why does the poet feel ‘forlorn;?’

Ans: The poet feels forlorn because he finds amidst people who are blind to the beauty and bounty of nature.

4.7 Explanation of Important passages:

Passage 1

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from William Wordsworth’s famous poem “The World is Too Much with Us” In this poem the poet criticises the decadent material cynicism of the time that made human beings insensitive towards the beauty of nature.

Explanation:

In these lines the poet says that people have become too much money-orientated. They waste their time in getting and spending money. They squander all their powers in their race for material things. The poet says that we have no time to look at the splendour of nature. Rather , we have given away our hearts away completely to the God of money.

Passage 2

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from William Wordsworth’s famous poem “The World is Too Much with Us” In this poem the poet criticises the decadent material cynicism of the time that made human beings insensitive towards the beauty of nature.

Explanation: In these lines the poet says that the sea bares her bosom to the moon. The winds that keep howling all the day, gather up like like sleeping flowers. We are infact, out of tune with these scenes. The poet states that people are not moved by the beautiful scenes of nature.

Passage 3

Great God! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,

Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Reference to the Context: These lines have been taken from William Wordsworth's famous poem "The World is Too Much with Us" In this poem the poet criticises the decadent material cynicism of the time that made human beings insensitive towards the beauty of nature.

Explanation: In these lines the poet says that he would rather be a pagan than be a Christian suckled in an obsolete religion. Infact, he wants to stand on this pleasant land and enjoy the sights and beauties of nature that makes him less dejected. Here he could see the Proteus, the sea God rising from the sea and also could hear the messenger of the sea God Triton blow his wreathed horn

4.8 Questions and Exercises

Answer the following Questions

1. According to the poet,how the world is too much with us?

Ans: According to the poet we aqre too much obsessed with the materialistic things and do not enjoy the beauties of nature.

2. According to the poet, Why can't we make nature a part of our life?

Ans: We cannot make nature a part of our life because we waste our time in getting and spending.

3. What message does this poem convey?

Ans: The poem conveys an important message that we should stop worshipping material good.

4. What type of sonnet is " The World is Too Much with Us"

Ans: It is a Petrarchan Sonnet.

Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words.

1. According to the poet, what is man's attitude to nature?

Ans: According to the poet, man has lost his connection with nature. He is too much obsessed with material things and wastes his time earning and spending.

2. Who were Proteus and Triton?

Ans: According to the Greek mythology, both Proteus and Triton were Sea Gods. Proteus could change his shape at will and Triton could control the sea waves by blowing his conch shell.

3. Why does the poet want to become a pagan?

Ans: The poet want be a pagan so that he could worship nature as God and gain spiritual comfort. He wishes to be in harmony with nature.

4. What does the poet mean by stating ,'The world is too much with us'.

Ans: According to the poet we are too much obsessed with the materialistic things and do not enjoy the beauties of nature.

5 What are we ‘out of tune’ with?

Ans; We are out of tune with nature. We have given our hearts away in exchange for money and material things.

6 What is the ‘sordid boon’?

Ans: According to the poet, we are so preoccupied with material things and have become mammon worshippers to such an extent that we have lost touch with the spiritual and natural object.

7 Who is a pagan, according to the poet?

Ans: A Pagan , according to the poet, is a non Christian. The poet believes that he would prefer to be in harmony with nature than follow a religion that separates him from nature.

Answer the following questions in about 200 words each.

1. What does the poet think about the way man treats nature? How does he express his thoughts and feelings on this topic in the poem?

Ans: In this poem, Wordsworth states that we care far too much about these worldly things. By using our time, minds, and energy in “getting and spending” we “lay waste our powers”. We are tied up in our greed for more money.

The poet declares that we should enjoy nature. He describes the beauties of nature. He describes the sea, and the wind, and the flowers. The poet personifies nature to help the reader to connect with each description. The sea “bares her bosom to the moon” which suggests an intimacy between the moon and the sea. The winds “howl”. This gives the wind human emotion. The flowers “sleep”. “we are out of tune” with nature because we are so caught up in worldly wealth. He appeals to God, and even exclaims that he would rather be a pagan than to be out of touch with nature and this would give him joy and hope, or at least make him feel “less forlorn”. He would rather be poor and helpless and connected with nature than rich and powerful and alienated from it.

In the final two lines, the poet looks out at the sea, enjoying nature, long enough to see Triton and Proteus. The speaker refers to these two pagan gods after he first appeals to God and swears that he would rather be a pagan than alienated from nature.

2. The Sonnet is a criticism of life in this mechanised milieu. Comment on this assessment of the poem.

Ans: In this Sonnet William Wordsworth has highlighted the decadent material cynicism of the time that has made man insensitive towards the beauty of nature. We are living in a mechanised world.

Wordsworth states that we care far too much about these worldly things. By using our time, minds, and energy in “getting and spending” we “lay waste our powers”. We are tied up in our greed for more money.

The poet accuses the modern age of having lost its connection to nature and to everything meaningful: “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” He says that even when the sea “bares her bosom to the moon” and the winds howl, humanity is still out of tune, and looks on uncaringly at

the spectacle of the storm. The speaker wishes that he were a pagan raised according to a different vision of the world, so that, "standing on this pleasant lea," he might see images of ancient gods rising from the waves, a sight that would cheer him greatly. He imagines "Proteus rising from the sea," and Triton "blowing his wreathed horn."

3. How does Wordsworth employ Greek mythology and other devices to portray the materialistic mind of modern man?

Ans: Apart from employing the Greek mythology, Wordsworth has used imagery, allusion and contrast to portray the decadent material cynicism of the time that made man insensitive towards the beauties of nature.

The metaphor "we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon" is also an oxymoron. Sordid suggests the worst aspects of human nature such as immorality, selfishness and greed, while a boon is something that functions as a blessing or benefit. The contradiction between the meanings of the words suggests that materialism is a destructive and corrupt blessing which the industrial revolution has produced. It emphasises the tension between the good exterior and the sordid truth behind materialism. On an exterior level, material goods bring pleasure and are a symbol of man's progress; however, in truth, they feed the worst aspects of humanity: thus a "sordid boon."

In the simile "and are up gathered now like sleeping flowers," sleeping flowers suggest that man is numb and unaware of the beauty and power of the natural world. At the same time, however, he is also optimistic, the image of sleeping flowers implies that humans are only inactive, and that there is some hope we will wake up and realise the power of nature.

The tone of the poem is angry, transformed with irony and apparent vengefulness. Initially, the poet reprimands the society for dedicating all its force to material things and pleasures. Later, he proclaims mockingly that he would rather be a pagan; at least then he could appreciate nature through different eyes and even see Proteus rising from the sea—perhaps to wreak vengeance on complacent humankind. Towards the end of the poem employing the Greek mythology the poet desires to see a return to the old times when people were in tune with the land and Nature. Proteus, from Greek mythology, the Old man of the Sea, takes different shapes and can be forced to predict the future. Triton is the son of Neptune, the sea god, and has the power to calm the seas with his conch-shell horn.

4. The poet refers Paganism to worldliness. Discuss.

Ans: According to Christianity, there is only one God. However, during the ancient times, particularly in Greece and Rome (Italy) people believed in many different Gods and worshipped many deities. Their religion was referred to as pagan religion and their Gods were referred to as Pagan or Heathen Gods. Christians believed paganism as a pejorative term and the term presumed a belief in false Gods.

But, the poet wishes to offend even Christianity for nature and become a pagan. He wishes he could be a pagan so that he could worship nature as God and gain spiritual relief.

He would prefer to be in harmony with nature than follow a religion that separates him from nature. The poem highlights that sordidness and crass materialism of modern life forces the poet to go back to the ancient myths and seek solace.