

## Romantic Aesthetics in "The Cuckoo"

Gulzar Jalal Yousafzai\*

### Abstract

*It appears that "The Cuckoo" was to Wordsworth what "Peacock" was to Darwin. It may be recalled that Darwin presented the theory of evolution and was hell-bent to the denial of God (or a supernatural power behind this Cosmic settings). He was keen to explain the natural phenomenon on the basis of "Chance production". However when he incidentally saw the multi-colored fascinating tail of the peacock, he felt the presence of a hidden hand in its creation and was almost ready to abandon his whole theory. Wordsworth on the other hand seems to be far more correct and imaginative in his feelings. He felt the presence of God in the manifestations of nature wherein cuckoo was taken as its chief representative. Probably it was for this reason that Allama Iqbal made a unique confession that in his early youth, it was Wordsworth's naturalism that saved him from an outright atheism.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Introduction

The love with nature and natural objects is the very essence of William Wordsworth's poetry. He is very sensitive to all natural things, however his feelings and love for birds is amazing. The bright and radiant colors of birds, the thrilling and melodious voices and songs, their sitting in the trees, their flight in the air, their nests and their relations with other natural objects, these and similar other features are very delectable for Wordsworth. Among the birds, his sentiments for the Cuckoo are very special and appealing. There are several reasons of his love and emotions. In this paper, some of these reasons have been discussed.

The first and foremost reason is the existence of aesthetic elements related to the Cuckoo. Aesthetics, a set of principles concerned with appreciation of beauty and a branch of philosophy which deals with the question of beauty and artistic task.<sup>2</sup> The cuckoo poems reflect aesthetic elements. For aesthetics, a natural object is seen, heard, felt, touched or tasted. In the same way the images, emotions, or past experience of the poet or situations and scenes etc, are very important. In

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\* Gulzar Jalal Yousafzai, Assistant Professor, English Department, Edwardes College Peshawar.

such circumstances, the feelings are expressed, as aesthetics is something other than criticism, appreciation, or creation.<sup>3</sup>

William Wordsworth does not appreciate the Cuckoo; he expresses his sentiments in different manners. In pure aesthetics only emotions are considered and Wordsworth has put them in a very delightful way. First, a few words about the historical background of the cuckoo poems. William Wordsworth, when he was at the zenith of his poetical career, composed three poems about the Cuckoo bird. Among them, two have the same title and the third one carries a different title. All of them have different composition and structure. The poems are given in "Selected Poems of William Wordsworth."<sup>4</sup> The first volume of which was published in 1913 under the World Classics Series. The poems in the collection have been classified under various headings; like, poems written in youth, poems referring to the period of childhood, poems founded on the affection, poems on the naming of places, poems of the fancy and poems of imagination. The Cuckoo poems are covered under the poems of imagination.<sup>5</sup> William Wordsworth has highlighted the aesthetical qualities in these poems with great subtleties. According to Bowra the Romantics knew how to use their senses.<sup>6</sup>

As far as the date of composition and other pertinent facts are concerned, details are provided by M. Bowra: Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy Wordsworth records that on March 22nd and 25th, 1802, William worked at the Cuckoo poem, and this is "To the Cuckoo" in which Wordsworth tells how he hears the cuckoo and wonders if it is not more than a bird, and this wonder rises from recollection of childhood when the cuckoo opened worlds of imagination to him, his visionary power.<sup>7</sup>

*O blessed Bird! The earth we pace  
Again appears to be  
An unsubstantial: fairy place  
That is fit home for thee*<sup>8</sup>

It is further said, the same in his poem on the rainbow which he wrote on March 26 the day after he finished to the cuckoo.<sup>9</sup>

In the Cuckoo poems, from aesthetics point of view, William Wordsworth has focused on the thrilling sound, rhythm, description of the scene, enjoyment on the arrival of the bird (feelings) and some other unknown features. Almost all the Romantic poets have this knack to create lively Romantic aesthetics for the senses of the readers. For the Romantics, imagination is fundamental. They think that without imagination poetry is impossible. They are also conscious of a wonderful capacity to create imaginary worlds. For them the power of poetry is

strongest when the creative impulse works untrammled. As Bowra says:

*"Wordsworth knows moments when he passes beyond to something else, and he believes that this task is essentially one of the imaginations. He has known it often enough in the past and he believes that it still comes to him, as it came to him when he heard the cuckoo, and was transported to another World."*<sup>10</sup>

The natural and gifted talent, sensitive feelings, and imagination are great asset to the Romantics. They create a new world through imagination. The depiction of scenes and feelings for aesthetics is a natural flow. In the following lines by Wordsworth, the readers can hear a sound, view the imagery, the sight, and feel the coldness of the scene.

*"The cocks did crow to – whoo, to – whoo  
And the sun did shine so cold"*<sup>11</sup>

In the same manner the opening lines of Christable by S.T. Coleridge, is a good example of sound rhythm and scene.

*"Tis the middle of night by the castle clock  
And the owls have awakened the crowing cock  
Tu-whit!- tu- whoo"*<sup>12</sup>

Wordsworth, in the Prelude, expresses the idea as:

*"Thus far, o friend! did I, not used to make  
A present joy the matter of song  
Pour out that day, my soul in measur'd strains?"*<sup>13</sup>

The poets, for reflection of aesthetics, use figures of speech to present and express their sentiments, to paint a picture of the scene and other relevant qualities. This sentimental approach shows the involvement of the poets and the love with which they compose. While showing his exaggerated happiness due to the arrival of the Cuckoo, Wordsworth uses hyperbole and says:

*"Thrice welcome, darling of the spring!"*<sup>14</sup>

He is also expressing his happiness by using the words:

*"O blithe new-comer"*<sup>15</sup>

He welcomes the cuckoo with deep emotions. In fact, the Cuckoo is a migratory bird, and heralds spring in England the rest of the Islands. Wordsworth, in his preface to the 1815 edition, has put the following note about the poem:

*"...this concise interrogation characterizes the seeming ubiquity of the cuckoo, and dispossesses the creature almost of corporeal existence; the imagination being tempted to this exertion of her power, a consciousness in the memory that the cuckoo is almost perpetually heard throughout the season of spring, but seldom becomes an object of sight. The cuckoo is the bird we associate with the name of vale of sunshine and of flowers, and yet its wandering voice brings back to me the thought of my vanished childhood."*<sup>16</sup>

Wordsworth composed the same idea in "Solitary Reaper" from lines 1 to 6. The only difference is that, in the case of cuckoo, he is familiar with the song, and has used the words: I have heard, When he was quite young, in his youth time, however in the case of "Solitary Reaper":

*Behold her, single in the field,  
yon solitary highland lass!  
reaping and singing by herself,  
stop here, or gently pass!  
alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
and sings a melancholy strain*<sup>17</sup>

The feelings have touched the heart directly without thinking. Due to his immense amusement, he says: Shall I call thee bird? You are an object of imagination or the object of my dream? William Wordsworth attaches sacred value of his youth, and even the memory of these impressions which remains with him to console his mature life. The bird is a link which binds him to his childhood (on the one side of realm of metaphysics on the other). The same idea has been expressed by P.B. Shelly, in his masterpiece, "To a Skylark":

*"Hail to thee, blithe spirit!  
Bird thou never wert."*<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Unattainable and mysterious, hidden or unknown approach is a high romantic quality, Wordsworth has expressed this very artistically:

*"A wandering voice?"*<sup>19</sup>

He has also used the phrase, "twofold shout" Twofold, as consisting of a double note in the form of echo, Compare Wordsworth's other poem on the same bird, which he composed in 1827 "the Cuckoo".

Lines 1- 4 are carrying the same idea.

*Yes, it was the mountain echo,  
Solitary, clear, profound,  
Answering to the shouting cuckoo,  
Giving to her sound for sound!*<sup>20</sup>

Considering again, aesthetic is something other than criticism, appreciation, or creation So William Wordsworth combined the truth, reality and imagination in these poems and created a unique and inspired situation, controlled by the sound and feeling of a bird. M Bowra provided further details:

*The Romantics were concerned with the things of the spirit and hoped that through imagination and inspired insight they could both understand them and present in compelling poetry.*<sup>21</sup>

The ultimate aim of Romantics was to convey the mystery of things through manifestation. Wordsworth proved this approach here in the case of "To the Cuckoo". His appeal is not to the logical mind, but to the sensitive and responsive heart, that is, to the aesthetic faculties, senses and emotions. With the help of imagination, Wordsworth fashioned shapes which display the unseen objects and their beauty. William Wordsworth is in the world of senses and his visionary and sensory powers are in action. William Wordsworth and John Keats are those Romantic poets who brought back keenness of ear and eye to poetry. The Cuckoo poems are good examples of the presentation of imaginative experience. The poet tried to convey some feelings with the help of figurative and literal language.

In the opening lines, he shows his jubilation at the arrival of the bird. With the arrival of the bird, the situation will become a fairy land. The Cuckoo is like a dream bird, therefore the "changed situation" will be quite suited for the bird. The Cuckoo provides the pleasure of happiness which appeals to the emotion of the poet. The first stanza is a clear example of aesthetics, complete feelings- feelings of pleasure, happiness, rejoice. The cuckoo is neither appreciated nor criticized, only the emotions have been expressed, the same sentiments which were in the past;

*"I have heard  
The same deep emotions from the core of heart, even now  
I hear thee and rejoice"*<sup>22</sup>

No description is given; even the very presence of the bird is

questioned. Why, because the thrilling voice which is termed as: "Or but a wandering voice". Whether the cuckoo is visible or not at the moment, it is out of question, the real matter is the feelings of the heart and the melodious voice in the surrounding, the situation is full of enjoyment, Wordsworth wants to celebrate it by saying:

*"O blithe new comer!..."*<sup>23</sup>

And in the fourth stanza:

*"Thrice welcome, darling of the spring."*<sup>24</sup>

Two facts have been highlighted; the arrival of the cuckoo and its thrilling voice, again the presence of the bird is ignored:

*"Even yet thou art to me/ No bird, but an invisible thing,  
A voice, a mystery."*<sup>25</sup>

Here if we compare William Blake's Robin Redbreast, which is itself a spiritual thing, not merely a visible bird, the powers which such a bird embodies and symbolizes, the free spirit which delights in song and in all that song implies.

*"A Robin redbreast in a cage  
Put all heaven in Rage"*<sup>26</sup>. (Bowra 14, 15)

In the very opening line Wordsworth says:

*I have heard, however the details of the effect is given in the 5th stanza;  
The same whom in my schoolboy days  
I listened to that Cry  
Which made me look a thousand ways?  
In bush, and tree and sky*<sup>27</sup>

A link has developed between present and past on hearing the song. The same cry, when the poet was the schoolboy, the feelings were the same, the appeal to the heart is same, that "Cry" and its effect was that, he had to look for the sound, the melody in bushes, trees and sky.

*"While I am lying on the grass Lying on the grass,"*<sup>28</sup>

The sense of touch which touches the heart rather than the body. On one hand, the poet is enjoying the touch of the green grass and on the other listening the echo of his beloved darling in the surrounding, the surrounding which is all around full of the thrilling sound:

*"Thy two fold should I hear  
At once far off and near."*<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

All the three poems are great example of Romantic aesthetics. The centre focus is the Cuckoo and its aesthetic qualities and elements. All these elements appeal to the senses. The words, phrases, and lines are directly absorbed and felt. The arrival of the Cuckoo, the jubilation of the poet, the feelings of sound and touch, the mystery of the bird, the memory of the bygone days, the bewilder-ness, the sweet song of the bird etc. William Wordsworth has felt the whole situation through his soul. He drew and painted it for thrill, taste and touch with various aesthetic elements. "For of God, of God they are."

**End Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *Stray Reflections*, (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992): P. 169
- <sup>2</sup> Catherine Soanes & Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English*, (Oxford University Press; 2nd Revised edition edition, 2003)
- <sup>3</sup> E. Bartellett, *Types of Romantic Judgment*, (Edinburgh: R and R limited, 1985)
- <sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1913)
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid; P. 143, 197, 284
- <sup>6</sup> C.M.Bowra, *The Romantic Imaginations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press): P. 81
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid;
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid; P. 93
- <sup>11</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, (Oxford University Press, USA; 2nd edition, 1970)
- <sup>12</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Christabel* (Poem), <http://www.englishforitalians.com/content/traduzioni/Christabel%20-%20Samuel%20T.%20Coleridge.pdf> (accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> December, 2010)
- <sup>13</sup> Wordsworth, "The Prelude"
- <sup>14</sup> William Wordsworth, "To The Cuckoo"
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> C.M.Bowra, *The Romantic Imaginations*
- <sup>17</sup> William Wordsworth, "The Solitary Reaper"
- <sup>18</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "To a Skylark"
- <sup>19</sup> William Wordsworth, "To The Cuckoo"
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> C.M.Bowra, *The Romantic Imaginations*
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> William Wordsworth, "To The Cuckoo"
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> C.M.Bowra, *The Romantic Imaginations*
- <sup>28</sup> William Wordsworth, "To The Cuckoo"
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.