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“now I am a man”: Manhood in William Wordsworth

Eijun Senaha

Introduction

What kind of man is William Wordsworth? The poet's image in my undergraduate classroom twenty years ago was filled with a kind of idealism toward this man of letters. Thanks to the professor of Romanticism who worshiped the poet so much, I had an impression that the poet was not a human but more like an alien sent by the Godly Nature. I mean, he was too unreal. So I ignored the alien Wordsworth, and, since graduation, I have enjoyed myself by studying gender in American and British literature.

Recently, however, I found myself not alone in feeling awkward about Wordsworth, when I read Kenneth Johnston's *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* published in 1998. Johnston questions the poet's given image: "Was Wordsworth ever young? On the evidence of his portraits, he seems to have looked old from a very early age"(6). Thus, Johnston's biographical study of Wordsworth's "self-fashioning" *Prelude* fabulously discloses the poet's real life out of the images created by the poet himself and by Wordsworthian scholars. It lured me, as a gender scholar who has been teaching a graduate seminar called "American Manhood in Literature," and I became fascinated in an examination of Wordsworth's hidden anxiety of manhood in his other "self-fashioning" poems.

In this paper, I would like first to illustrate the method I will use and to introduce two types of the gender criticism: one relating to the establishment and another dealing with the vicissitudes of his manhood. The first gender criticism will show the historical as well as cultural perception for the poet, while the second discussion indicates that Wordsworth was not an alien but a human who wanted to be a man. For this latter discussion, I would like to introduce the poet's most crucial periods in his formation of manhood and then briefly examine a few poems. My biographical reading of the poems may appear too plain for experts of Wordsworth, but I hope the application of Men's Studies into the life of literary canon may shed light on the poet's hidden nature.

1

A method I am trying to apply in this presentation is based on an approach of "Men's Studies." Like the Feminist Movement, the Free Men's Movement was born in the 1960s, and, like Women's Studies, Men's Studies became a curriculum of Sociology Departments in American universities in the 1980s. The task of Men's Studies is simply to define "Man," and it roughly consists of two groups. The scholars of one group tend to blame feminists for their creation of a "deformed image of manhood" which has prevailed for the last 30 years, and tries to reestablish traditional manly virtues in the present day. The other scholars are pro-feminists and wish to free both men and women from restraints as they regard both man and woman as victims of socially as well as culturally constructed femininities and masculinities. Their interests can be divided into the class-conscious Marxist Men's Studies, Gay Studies, and Psychoanalysis on Masculinity. I stand with Pro-feminist Men's Studies scholars who look at individual man's psyche and examine his struggle with his gender identity.

In Men’s Studies, therefore, the attention toward Wordsworth divides into two opposing ways: a man of an established manhood or a man in search of himself. Anti-feminist Men’s Studies scholars try to bring traditional manhood back to the present time and take advantage of Wordsworth as a representative of ideal manhood. In a recently published book, *What Is A Man?: 3000 Years of Wisdom on the Art of Manly Virtue*, the editor Waller R. Newell introduces four of Wordsworth’s poems. In the book’s introduction, Newell says;

[I]n our public discourse, in the worlds of academia, government, the social welfare bureaucracy, the educational establishment, and the learned professions, an open discussion of manliness as a positive form of behavior is almost taboo. In many of these circles, to suggest without a sneer of irony that one should ‘be a man’ would produce ripples of cringing embarrassment over the after-dinner decaf. There is a huge vacuum in our moral vocabulary about the whole subject of the manly virtues, a feeling that even to raise such a matter is retrograde or at least a faux pas, like ordering Chardonnay with beef. We feel manly passions and impulses, but we don’t know how to articulate them. (xvii)

In its chapter “The Wise Men,” Wordsworth’s two poems appear: “My Heart Leaps Up” (w. 1802) and “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Childhood” (w. 1802-07). Newell says;

A wise man is cautious and deliberate, reserving judgment and taking nothing for granted. Among his qualities are a commitment to open-mindedness and an ability to look beyond the conventional wisdom of the status quo... [W]isdom is intrinsically connected with intellectual modesty. (128)

In a chapter called “The Manly Father,” Newell mentions “For many men family life is the source of their chief satisfactions, and most men at some

point find themselves contemplating the meaning of life in a larger religious or philosophical context” (197) and introduces Wordsworth 1798 poem “Anecdote for Fathers” (w 1798). In his Chapter entitled “The Noble Man,” Newell’s idealism of Wordsworth escalates and he says, “the Romantic poet William Wordsworth contended that “there is one great society alone on earth, the noble Living and the noble Dead”(329). In its “Man of Integrity and Honor” section, he selects “The Happy Warrior” (1798).

Wordsworth as an established man of masculinity is not new. It has been affirmed again and again for over two centuries. The image of ideal manhood in Wordsworth at the beginning of the century is a good example. When World War I broke out, Manhood in Wordsworth was taken advantage of by the British Imperialists who found the poet’s references to Man, or masculinities, appropriate for wartime propaganda. In 1915, a collection of Wordsworth’s poetry, *The Patriotic Poetry of William Wordsworth: A Selection*, was published from Clarendon Press, with introduction and notes by an Oxford Professor Arthur H. D. Acland. It was a year after WWI began. Acland introduces, “The value of these poems to us now is to be found in their expression in immortal verse of what was the attitude of many thousands of our fellow countrymen in our great national struggle against Napoleon a century ago.” Thus, “The selection has been made primarily in view of poetic excellence, but in part also with regard to the present situation.” Adding five poems to the poet’s original grouping of *Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty*, Acland selected 36 poems composed between 1802 and 1811. Acland explains Wordsworth’s patriotic poetry in relation to his “Poetry of Nature and of Man” with his frequent references to “Soul” and “Liberty,” as the key words which are necessary to understand the poet’s

“undivided patriotism for England.” Therefore, Acland declares, “We have to sound ourselves under [Wordsworth’s] guidance, and it is not easy task, to ‘know the destiny of man and live in hope’” (8). As David H. Morgan mentions in his “Theater of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities, “Of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and developed, those associated with war and the military are some of the most direct” (165). As Wordsworth’s masculinity in patriotism were constructed, reproduced, and developed a century after his composition of the poems, his manhood of fatherliness, wisdom, honor, and integrity are again constructed, reproduced, and developed into the 21st century.

2

However, whether Wordsworth’s masculinity was biologically formatted is doubtful, because, as many other sociologists believe, “Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it is socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological make-up; it is created in culture” (120), and I believe there are enough reasons to say that, under the intimidating circumstances, Wordsworth was in a continual effort to say “now I am a man.”

Wordsworth’s life, at least from his childhood to his marriage with Mary Hutchinson in October, 1802, was filled with critical incidents that influenced his construction, reconstruction, or deconstruction, of manhood.

His orphanage is the first to mention as it surely created a trauma of his lost identity. His mother Ann left him forever when he was only a seven-year-old boy. Though William recalls, “O lost too early for the frequent tear,” she “was the ‘parent hen’ around whom the children

trooped and [was] so much the ‘center,’ so much ‘the heart/And the hinge of all our learning and our loves” (Johnston 33). Ann could have become a teacher of traditional manly virtues for William if she had been like other conservative mothers, but instead she allowed young William to be “a naked boy” surrounded by the beautiful nature of Cockermouth. Therefore, it becomes natural for Wordsworth later to be obsessed with Nature firstly because his mother’s non-classical Rousseauistic education predominated him, probably more so especially after he was taken to the Penrith Cookson and placed under the constant pressures to shape “novelties” and “false unnatural hopes” for his future as a man. Moreover, it is plausible that his love for his mother was replaced by his love of mother “nature as the last resort” whenever his identity crisis occurred.

William’s father was a busy practicing attorney who had little time to spend with his children. His death occurred when William was 13 years old, and the loss of the boy’s role model for masculinity obviously threatened his gender identity. As Johnston says, “His recollection of waiting for the horses, [on a 1783 Christmas day of his father’s death], stuck in his imagination a long time—at least twenty years, when it joined his other childhood ‘spot of time’ at Penrith Beacon to form the visionary diptych by which he symbolized the final resolution of the 1799 edition of *Prelude*’s crisis: ‘Imagination, How Impaired and Restored.’” (Johnston 93).

As both feminist and men’s studies scholars point out, the loss of parents means loss of the domestic gender education that result in losing the child’s own gender identity. In an essay “The Male Body and Literary Metaphors for Masculinity,” Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin says, “For the little boy, masculinity is experienced as constant insecurity in face of the threat of feminine absorption; the ubiquitous fear that one’s sense of maleness and masculinity are in danger, what theorists label

“symbiosis anxiety,” is a major factor in the creation and experience of masculinity. When compared to girls, boys, therefore, appear to experience more stress as they develop and mature” (245). Without the presence of both parents when in need of his initial gender formation, the young Wordsworth was no exception.

As Wordsworth grew and entered Cambridge, he became conscious of his manly career: A teenager Wordsworth dreams of entering army. When he stayed with Dorothy and Mary Hutchinson at Penrith in 1787 and 1789, he mentioned his masculine desire. Mary Moorman describes:

He would, he said, have liked to enter the army. He had read books of military history and strategy, and thought he had ‘a talent for command’. But he dreaded being sent to the West Indies, which were then indeed more fatal to British soldiers than any human enemy, before the study of hygiene and tropical medicine had begun. In a letter to Lord Lonsdale, written in 1812, he speaks rather obscurely of the circumstances in which ‘my youth was placed, that threw great difficulties in the way of my adopting that profession to which I was most inclined, and for which I was perhaps best qualified’. (152-53)

Climate and disease were not the only reason Wordsworth gave up his manly future. As Moorman sympathizes, Wordsworth had ‘no money available for the purchase of a commission’ (153). Wordsworth’s aspiration for the French Revolution and his sense of justice and patriotism, in the form of entering military, was denied, as it also denied his personal mission to establish manhood.

In 1792 in France when he was 21 years young, Wordsworth’s gender identity was further jeopardized by an affair with Annette Vallon and by the birth of Caroline. This well-known episode nowadays, though not clarified enough, is the key incident in his whole life that deconstructed

his manliness. Given the information that Wordsworth was developing a friendship with one of the heroic generals in France, Michel-Arnaud Bacharetie de Beaupuy (1755-96), just about this time, his decision to desert lover and child must have been devastating. Beaupuy was the “man [Wordsworth] loved as a man” with whom he could enjoy discussions on ‘individual heroism’ and ‘rescuing damsels in stress’” (Johnston 303, 305). Despite his friendship with Beaupuy, Wordsworth rejected himself as an ideal “husband” of Annette and “manly father” of Caroline. Not only husbandly care of his significant other but “Fatherhood and manliness have always been closely connected, not only because fathering a child is a palpable proof of manhood, but because fathers are supposed to provide their sons [and daughters] with a model of how to live” (N xxi). The affair with Annette Vallon traumatized the rest of his life.

Thus, orphanage, career, affair, and illegitimate child haunted him, festering his wounded manhood. It was not until ten years later in 1802, to say the least, that Wordsworth’s gender anxiety was released. The Peace of Amien between Britain and France was signed on March 27, and Wordsworth, Annette, and Caroline were reunited in August. How they responded to each other and what they talked about are not known, but Wordsworth appears to have settled the manly issue in his own right. And what was proving his manhood more was that Wordsworth was to publicly announce his marriage with Mary Hutchinson two months later in October 4. Wordsworth’s sense of personal relief suffused his writing, and the year became one of the most productive in his career.

3

Wordsworth’s gender anxiety is metaphorically illustrated in his poems written during the period, especially in his relation with nature.

He is constantly in search of his manhood as he is trapped by his unmanly past and manly future. In these poems, while he is agonized by quivering manhood, he recollects childhood for an imaginative escape to his innocence when gender anxiety was yet to be born as his parents were still alive. Unconsciously, therefore, Nature operates as a kind of shelter for the jeopardized Wordsworth to rescue him and lead him to manliness, like an anima in Jungian terms if it were not his dead mother who taught him his love of nature.

Now, I would like to briefly discuss four of the poet's first-person narrative autobiographical poems, adopting Bloomian reading of the poet/narrator's anxieties. Though many pastoral readings have guided the reader to an understanding of the Nature poet's communion with the surroundings, I believe that they are actually about his relation with his inner-nature of manhood as the poet frequently refers to his own gender “Man.” Two 1798 poems, “Lines Written in Early Spring” and “Tintern Abbey” demonstrate the poet's male anxiety, anxiety caught by his failed manhood which he tries to rationalize. The next two poems, “My Heart Leaps Up” and the first four stanzas of the “Intimations Ode,” were both written in March of 1802 when Wordsworth felt his sense of manliness regenerating toward the reunion with Annette and Caroline and his marriage with Mary Hutchinson.

In “Lines Written in Early Spring,” the poet describes himself being struck by his anxiety for manhood. While everything in nature is blended in harmony and pleasure, he is suddenly visited by “sad thoughts.” Some critics generalize the “sad thoughts” as the poet's pessimistic concern with the nature of human follies, while others particularize it as the poet's reference to the French invasion of Switzerland. Wordsworth doesn't mention the cause for the “sad thoughts,” but his sadness is

directed to grieve him more and he questions himself: “What man has made of man” (l. 8). This phrase haunts him and comes back to him again at the end of the poem: “What man has made of man?” Though the cause is still ambiguous and his affair with Annett may be no more than a speculation, it is clear that the poem is about self-doubt about human nature in general, or, more specifically, a doubt about the construction of manhood. His past clearly shakes his identity as a man, and his masculinity is trembling.

Another 1798 poem “Tintern Abbey” provides us with more dependable information of his gender anxiety. The symbolic date of composition, July 13, is the very same day Wordsworth visited France for the first time eight years earlier. In the poem, the poet looks back at 1793, a year after he left the pregnant Annette behind. He recalls the year 1793 when he was, “more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads” (ll. 70-71). Though he “cannot paint / what then [he] was,” the series of self-negation along with sexual implications indicates his “thoughtless youth” with Annette. Johnston says, “Repressing his feeling for Annette, he in effect weds himself with nature” (598). Wordsworth’s masculinity is undetectable, and he personifies, rather than metaphorize, nature as his last resort to escape from his fallen manhood: “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her” (ll. 122-23). His symbolic wedding with nature is not just his unmanly flight from reality, but, in a sense, it is also his regression to his innocent childhood. Thus, defeated by his own sense of manhood, Wordsworth hopes “in after years / When these wild ecstasies shall be matured / Into sober pleasure” (ll. 137-39).

Many poems in *Lyrical Ballads* were composed so hurriedly between March and May of 1798 to raise funds to visit Germany that the ambiguities in the poems shown here are the products that show Wordsworth’s creative anxiety as well as the products that unveil the poet’s hidden and

growing anxieties of masculinity.

In early 1802, as he prepares to visit France to see Annette again and the nine-year-old Caroline for the first time, Wordsworth's gender anxiety is released toward joy more than remorse.

“My heart leaps up,” Wordsworth says, “when I behold / A rainbow in the sky” (ll. 1-2). The “rainbow” is a visual image for the poet's psyche that reveals his expectations of re-connecting the broken tie with Annette and Caroline, and, by doing so, he attempts to connect all pieces of his lost manhood. Imagining the bridging rainbow as a vehicle to re-collect his memories and wishes, he looks back at his past, present, and future: “So was it when my life began; / So is it now I am a man; / So be it when I shall grow old, / Or let me die!” (ll. 3-6). The poet's view of life reaches climax with the very famous but rather obscure expression of “The Child is father of the Man” (l. 7). Is it a paradox that the adult is the product or result of his childhood experiences and impressions,” as Jack Stillinger says (527)? Or is it “the legacy, [as Lionel Trilling sees it], left by the child to the man” (527)? Or, is it more autobiographical and self-fashioning? To me, Wordsworth appears to be saying that Caroline was the metaphoric teacher of his manhood: Though she was not present with him, she was omnipresent in his psyche and teaching him as fathers teach their boys how to be a man. Thus, he wishes “my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety,” as he dreams of the reunion with his teacher-like daughter.

Though written immediately after the joyful “My Heart Leaps Up,” the first four stanzas of “Intimations Ode” is more meditative, sedate, remorseful, and more autobiographical. Despite his confidence in the “Rainbow,” the poet knows the mutability of life as “The rainbow comes and goes” (ll. 10). Though his juvenile errors may have brought him “a

thought of grief,” “A timely utterance [of the 1802 Peace Treaty with France] gave that thought of relief” and made him “I again am strong,” as he prepares for the reunion. Though his joy is seemingly derived from a “happy Shepherd-boy,” one would easily notice it is the poetic invention of the poet’s reference to his own daughter Caroline: “Thou Child of Joy, / Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts” (ll.34-35). The poet’s fatherly love is more direct in the fourth stanza as “the Babe leaps up on his mother’s arm; — / I hear, I hear, with joy I hear” (ll. 49-50). He appears to be learning fatherly joy, but he notices he is losing imagination. Nature is now a space for children, and the poet becomes a bystander of nature and children. Losing a place for flight and regression all of a sudden, he speculates upon his whereabouts of a newly-sensed territory of manhood: “Where is it now, the glory and the dream” (l. 57). In this poem, the poet’s anxiety is released, and he appears to be gaining a certain kind of manhood, but at the same time, he is anxious about his disappearing child/immature self.

These poems of “release” appear to indicate that the poet has healed his trauma. In fact, after 1802, Wordsworth starts to confidently produce poems of stronger masculinity as I previously mentioned the poems of the established manhood.

Conclusion

Every man is continuously in struggle to establish, or at least to resolve, his identity as a “Man.” Wordsworth was not an exception, and he continued to resolve his identity as a man and spent much of his life revising his autobiographical works even after his social achievement as the Poet Laureate in 1843. The three revisions of his autobiographical epic *The Prelude* which is subtitled “The Growth of a Poet’s Mind” is particularly suggestive of his obsession to pursue his ideal self.

Through his canonization in the patriarchal 19th-Century Britain, he becomes more aware of his social iconography as a Man of Letters. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin analyzes the relation between Patriarchy and an individual man: “Patriarchal ideology takes the male body, or rather a fantasied version of the male body... The organization of social and cultural life within patriarchy mirrors this fantasied collective male experience and the individual man’s experience of himself and his relationships to surroundings” (240). For Wordsworth, re-vision was an act of continuing effort, enabling him to self-fashion his own life towards the construction of his Romanticized Manhood.

What kind of man is William Wordsworth? In short, William Wordsworth was the man always searching for a time to say, “now I am a man.” Therefore, the conclusion to my presentation may not be conclusive, as my study will also be a continuing re-search for the fantasied manhood.

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