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## HUMANISING IMPACT OF WORDSWORTH'S POETRY ON JOHN STUART MILL

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**Abstract:-**John Stuart Mill, the son of James Mill, was educated by his father following the utilitarian principles of Jeremy Bentham and the then popular principle of Associationism. He was kept away from the outside influences in his early life and was educated at home. His father hoped that J S Mill would carry on the principles of Utilitarianism ahead, making “the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers” his motto of life. However, very soon he found himself in very ‘dull states of nerves’ as he could not take pleasure in the utilitarian principles. He could find nothing which could give him hope and purpose to live life. In such a state of mind, he came in touch with Wordsworth’s poetry which lifted his low spirits and filled him with unbound enthusiasm for life. Later, J S Mill even modified some of the tenets of his utilitarian philosophy by differentiating between quantity and quality of pleasures.

**Keywords:***John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Utilitarianism, Dejection, Inspiration, Healing Touch, Quality and Quantity of Pleasures, Feelings.*

### OBJECTIVE

William Wordsworth is a poet of hope and strength, who has always stood true to the function of poetry which, according to him, is

... to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight, by making the happy happier, to lead the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think and to feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous. (Letters 146)  
Wordsworth’s poetry has given hope to the hopeless and infused an ardent desire to live the life with full zest by making not only their lives better but also by working for the betterment of others’ lives. Wordsworth has a very high conception of his calling and calls poetry “the first and last of all knowledge, it is as immortal as the heart of man” (Gill 606). Wordsworth worked all his life for the betterment of human life and the void created by the hollowness consequent upon the loss of human values was filled by his noble poetry. His poetry endeavoured to “arouse the sensual from their sleep / Of Death and win the vacant and the vain / With noble rupture” (Wordsworth, “Prospectus” The Excursion lines 60-62). His poetry inspires people even today in the age of excessive materialism and selfishness. John Stuart Mill, who once lost all hope and enthusiasm in life, turned to Wordsworth and found medicinal value in his poetry, which once again created an unbound enthusiasm in his life.

John Stuart Mill was the son of James Mill, an avowed utilitarian highly influenced by the political philosophy of Jeremy Bentham the basic axiom of whose philosophy was that it is greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong. In his *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham remarks:  
Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think ... (11)

J S Mill was educated by his father James Mill following the principles of utilitarianism of Bentham and associationism, and, therefore, he was shielded from the association of other children of his age. J S Mill’s upbringing was a lot different from that of other children of his age and, in a way, he did not grow naturally, rather “he had been manufactured” (Ryan 33). Jeremy Bentham attached little importance to arts like poetry and considered it to be a trifling past time. Mill’s utilitarian education “left him with no power to feel” (Ford & Christ 896). Jeremy Bentham never took the spiritual needs of individuals into consideration and called religion “outmoded superstition” (Ford & Christ 896) as it did not pass the “rationalist test of value” (Ford & Christ 896).

However, this rationalist upbringing devoid of any emotional or spiritual ingredient very soon shattered J S Mill’s

enthusiasm “to be a reformer of the world” (Mill 132.) and in the autumn of 1826, he found himself in “dull state of nerves” (Mill 133). In this low state of mind, Mill put a question to himself:

“Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at his very instance; would this be a great joy and happiness to you”. (Mill 133)

The answer to this question was in the negative. J S Mill felt a shock, “At this my heart sank within me; the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down” (Mill 134). Mill felt as if he had “nothing left to live for” (Mill 134). He had sunk into such dejection which he could not describe in words. He says:

The lines in Coleridge’s *Dejection*—I was not then acquainted with them—exactly described my case:

“A grief without a pang, void, dark and drier,  
A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet or relief  
In word, or sigh, or tear”. (Mill 134)

Now Mill was feeling aimless and he felt that his “love of mankind and of excellence for its own sake had worn itself out” (Mill 135). At such a time of depression and dejection he could find none with whom he could share his state of mind. He could not seek the advice of even his father as:

My father to whom it would have been natural to me to have recourse in any practical difficulties, was the last person to whom, in such a case as this, I looked for help. Everything convinced me that he had no knowledge of any such mental state as I was suffering from and that even if he could be made to understand it, he was not the physician who could heal it. My education, which was wholly his work, had been conducted without any regard to the possibility of its ending in this result; and I saw no use in giving him the pain of this kind that his plans had failed, when the failure was probably irremediable, and at all events beyond the power of his remedies. (Mill 135)

Mill’s father had based J S Mill’s education on the principles of *Associationism* according to which “We love one thing, and hate another, take pleasure in one sort of action or contemplation, and pain in another sort, through the clinging of pleasurable or painful ideas to those things, from the effect of education or experience” (Mill 136). Therefore, J S Mill had been rigorously trained to “form the strongest possible associations of the salutary class; associations of pleasures with all things beneficial to the great whole and of pain with all things hurtful to it” (Mill 136). Later in life Mill realized the associations thus made were “artificial and casual” (Mill 137). J S Mill remarks:

The very excellence of analysis ... is that it tends to weaken and undermine whatever is the result of prejudice; that it enables us mentally to separate ideas which have only casually clung together. (Mill 137)

Though Mill maintains “analytic habits” were “favourable to prudence and clear sightedness” but at the same time they were “a perpetual worm at the root both of the passions and of the virtues” (Mill 138).

During this time of mental crisis, Mill felt that his “education ... had failed to create these feelings [feelings which made the good of others] in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis” (Mill 138) and, therefore, he was “left stranded at the commencement of [his] voyage with a well-equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail, without any real desire for the ends which [he] had been so carefully fitted out to work for; no delight in virtue or the general good” (Mill 139). He was not able to take delight in selfish or unselfish pleasures at all. Though he carried on his usual business but there was no charm in it. He found the true description of his mental state in the following two lines of Coleridge:

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
And hope without an object cannot live.

Under the darkness of dejection, he caught a ray of hope when he was reading Marmontel’s Memoires. Mill writes:

I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel’s “*Memoires*”, and came to the passage which relates his father’s death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them. (Mill 140)

However, he could not get a permanent remedy for his depression. Experiences he had had during this time made deep impact on him. J S Mill further writes:

I never, indeed, wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules and end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy ... who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit followed not as a means but as itself an ideal end. (Mill 142)

This phase in the life of J S Mill had taught him to maintain “a due balance among the faculties” (Mill 143) of the heart as well as the mind. J S Mill still considered the “power and practice of analysis as an essential condition both of individual and of social improvement” (Mill 143.). However, “the cultivation of the feelings” (Mill 143) became one of the cardinal points in his ethical and philosophical thought.

In 1828 J S Mill turned to the poetry of William Wordsworth in the hope of getting mental relief. He had already read Byron whom he found to be “the lament of a man who had worn out all pleasures” (Mill 146). However, Wordsworth’s poetry

“proved to be the precise thing for [his] mental wants at that particular juncture” (Mill 147). Wordsworth’s poetry talked of “the love of rural objects and natural scenery” (Mill 147) which proved to be “a foundation ... for taking pleasure in Wordsworth’s poetry” (Mill 147). J S Mill writes:

What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling. Under the excitement of beauty, they seemed to be the very culture of the feelings which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw a source of inward joy, with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed. (Mill 148)

Mill acknowledges that Wordsworth’s poetry made him “feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation ... with a greatly increased interest in the common feelings and common destiny of human beings” (Mill 148). J S Mill later modified the theory of utilitarianism as given by Jeremy Bentham and differentiated between higher pleasure and lower pleasure. He laid his emphasis on the need to take into consideration the quantity as well as quality of pleasure while applying the principle of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. Mill stresses that some forms of happiness are simply, morally higher and more valuable than others. Thomas Woods quotes J S Mill:

... it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig are of a different opinion, it is because they know only their own side of the question. (75)

Wordsworth’s poetry ennoble us and leads us to the great heights of sublimity from the deep dungeon of “debasement passions”. Even in the 21st century he makes us see the light of life in the darkness of worldly evils and gives hope of a better tomorrow. W J Dawson rightly remarks:

There is gravity and sweetness in Wordsworth’s poems which could only spring from a noble nature, ruled by the daily vigilance of duty, and dedicated to the daily contemplation of lofty purposes. He makes us feel his entire remoteness from all sordid aims and debasing passions, and he calls us to a higher, a simpler, a serener life. He preaches to an age corrupted with sensationalism the joy that lies in natural emotions; to an age stung with the hunger for impossible ideals the attainable valour and nobility of homely life; to an age tormented by insatiable thirst for riches the old Divine lesson that “a man’s life consisteth not in abundance of things which he possesseth”. To the worldly he speaks of unworldliness; to the perplexed, of trust, to the victims of vain perturbation and disquiet, of peace. (112-113)

J R Watson pays a glowing tribute to Wordsworth for being “rock of defence for human nature, an upholder and preserver, carrying with him relationship and love” (210). Like J S Mill Wordsworth’s poetry has given, and keeps giving, consolation and encouragement to those who find themselves snared in the net of evils brought out into the world by excessive materialism, loss of human values and alienation from self as well as nature. To sum up in the words of W J Wawson:

He breathes consolation and encouragement into tired hearts and failing spirits. He is the apostle of peace, the minister of cleansing to this time. He has nothing new or startling to say: he sings of love and duty, of disciplined desires and purged and regulated passions but he speaks as one who has attained and knows the secret of perpetual content. (113)

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