

Sample Research Essay

Harry Potter

Ms. Boland

English II Honors

14 January 2015

Dorothy Wordsworth: Secret Poet

Many people have heard of the famous poet William Wordsworth; however, his sister, Dorothy, was also an English pastoral poet who was lesser known and appreciated than her brother. The siblings shared a close bond that held firm throughout their lives. Literary critics today still speculate as to whether this relationship was codependent or merely a close brother-sister relationship. Although she was born on Christmas day in the year 1771, Dorothy did not have such a merry childhood (Woof). This shaped her viewpoint on the world, and influenced her writing. Dorothy's complicated relationship with her brother, William, as well as her realist ideology developed through many childhood events, are shown in her literary works, many of which shaped her brother's poetry as well.

Dorothy's childhood hardships left her searching for parental affection and personal happiness. She was only six years old when her mother died. After this traumatic event, she left her father and brothers and went to live with her mother's cousin, Elizabeth Threlkeld, in Halifax, Yorkshire. Elizabeth Threlkeld, called "Aunt Elizabeth" by Dorothy, encouraged good habits and became a role model for the young girl. Aunt Elizabeth trained Dorothy and focused on character as opposed to accomplishment. Dorothy did not see her father or brothers for over

nine years “and was not in Cockermouth for her father’s funeral at the start of 1784, when she was twelve” (Woof). Despite having to face several traumatic experiences during her childhood, Dorothy developed a close relationship with a girl at her boarding school which led to fond memories of her childhood. She became so obsessed with these happy memories that she abandoned any chance of living in the moment. This is illustrated in her “Grasmere Journal”; on December 24, 1801, the day before her thirtieth birthday, she wrote that she was thinking about the previous year when she should have been enjoying her current year’s birthday (Woof).

Dorothy’s close relationship with her brother Wordsworth allowed her to become a primary inspiration and influence on his works. When she was twenty-four, Dorothy moved with Wordsworth to Racedown, where he became a writer. Dorothy kept the house clean, while also helping Wordsworth with his writing (Levin). This was around the same time that she began to write many letters. Two years later, Dorothy and Wordsworth moved to Alfoxden House where Dorothy began writing her Alfoxden Journal, in which she recorded her life with her brother (Levin). Dorothy and Wordsworth then moved to Dove Cottage, located in the fairly isolated Lake District. It was here that “William Wordsworth wrote some of the greatest poetry in the English language and Dorothy kept her famous ‘Grasmere Journal’” (“Discover Dove Cottage.”). In one journal entry, Dorothy discusses how Wordsworth, while the two were alone in the library, “brought out a volume of Enfield's *Speaker*, another miscellany, and an odd volume of Congreve's plays” (Scott). In this account, Wordsworth also encouraged Dorothy to read and appreciate writing, revealing the intimacy of Dorothy and Wordsworth’s relationship. Wordsworth often consulted “his sister's journal to aid his own writing. Dorothy's language intermingles with her brother's” (Levin).

Soon, Dorothy became infatuated with Wordsworth, and her obsession then turned into an emotional dependence. The two had a deep connection and made a promise they would never leave each other. Because Dorothy had no other man in her life, “in some ways, it was a very incestuous relationship” (“Sister Act”). The night before Wordsworth’s wedding day, Dorothy slept with Wordsworth's wedding ring on her finger. The next morning, Dorothy gave the ring back to Wordsworth and blessed him, and then Wordsworth then put the ring back on Dorothy’s finger and blessed her as well. Finally, Dorothy gave him the ring back, and Wordsworth went to get married. For Wordsworth, Dorothy was not a love interest, but a muse. However, Dorothy was depressed; when Wordsworth did not need her anymore, she became angry and aggressive because she believed she had no reason to live. For many years before her mental deterioration, Dorothy willingly helped her brother, and he later returned the favor later when Dorothy became mentally ill. As Dorothy had been living in his attic for over twenty years, Wordsworth would go to the top of the house to nurse her in the years before he died. After Wordsworth's death, Dorothy's mental health vastly improved, and she regained some of the personality traits she had lost in her obsession with her brother (“Sister Act”).

Dorothy’s April 15, 1802, journal entry in her “Grasmere Journal” was used as inspiration for Wordsworth’s poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” and the two poems display many parallels, even as the two writers display different styles. Dorothy focused on her surroundings rather than herself and her feelings. She was not self-centered and, therefore, the “Grasmere Journal” was “the least egocentric [journal] ever read” (“Sister Act”). For this reason, Dorothy uses the word “we” instead of “I” in her writing (Wordsworth, D.). This is different from Wordsworth’s poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” because he talks self-centeredly about

himself and how the daffodils make him feel. Wordsworth's famous poem reads: "A poet could not but be gay" (15). Wordsworth focuses on the happiness the daffodils cause him to feel, not the daffodils themselves. Wordsworth also writes that "I gazed—and gazed—but little thought/What wealth the show to me had brought" (17-18). Wordsworth says he had not realized at the time how much this memory would impact him. Here, he uses "I" and "me," unlike Dorothy. He also uses the word "wealth," meaning he is equalizing the memory of the daffodil walk with money or resources; it is as if the memory has made him rich or powerful. Both Dorothy and Wordsworth wrote that the daffodils "danced" (Wordsworth, D.; Wordsworth, W.). Dorothy wrote that the daffodils "tossed and reeled and danced" because they were tired (Wordsworth, D.). Wordsworth describes how the "golden daffodils" were "fluttering and dancing" because they were joyous (4,6). Both Dorothy and Wordsworth use personification to further enhance their descriptions of the daffodils (Wordsworth, D.; Wordsworth, W.). Dorothy's journal entry states that "some [daffodils] rested their heads," (Wordsworth, D.) implying that the daffodils are tired; she may be passively placing her own feelings onto the daffodils. Wordsworth also personifies the daffodils in a similar manner, describing the daffodils as having heads: "Tossing their heads in sprightly dance" (12). As opposed to his sister, Wordsworth sees the daffodils as happy and "sprightly". Wordsworth uses hyperbole in his poem while Dorothy describes the event realistically. Wordsworth's poem dreamily reads, "[The daffodils] stretched in never-ending line" (9). There were so many daffodils, they seemed endless to Wordsworth; he was extremely happy at the sight. Here, he exaggerates to get the magnitude of his emotions across. Dorothy clearly describes the actual length of the line of daffodils: "We saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road"

(Wordsworth, D.). This shows Dorothy as a realist, as opposed to Wordsworth, who was a romanticist.

Dorothy's writing is much appreciated today by literary critics who believed Dorothy was a powerful influence on Wordsworth's works. One literary critic noted, "much seems offered [from Dorothy's works] to Wordsworth for the material of his poetry" ("The Woman"). This is supported by the publishing dates of Dorothy's works versus Wordsworth's poetry. Dorothy's daffodil journal entry from "Grasmere Journal" was published in the year 1802, whereas Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," written about the same daffodil memory, was published in 1804, two years after Dorothy's journal. Another critic describes how "these daffodils suggested to her brother one of the most beautiful of his short poems" (Lee). Yet, Dorothy did not write for fame or to build a career; however, she did write for a specific purpose: "[Dorothy's 'Grasmere Journal'] was written just for herself and for her brother" ("The Woman"). Dorothy also believed her work was not well-written enough to be published or appreciated by others (Levin). Dorothy's writing "gave birth to many of her brother's [other] poems" (Lee).

Dorothy and William Wordsworth worked as a cohesive writing team for many years, something that is revealed when comparing the two's works. Dorothy's unique childhood experiences, while traumatic at first glance, shaped her worldview, creating a true realist out of her. This outlook on life is displayed in many of Dorothy's journal entries and poems. However, what remains to confuse literary critics today is why Dorothy, who had such a strong, complex relationship with her brother, Wordsworth, did not completely break down mentally when Wordsworth died. At the time, Dorothy had been struggling with mental illness, mainly

depression. This is why it is perplexing that Dorothy did not severely grieve and continue with her mental downward spiral. Instead, she regained many of her old characteristics and lived a happy number of years until her own demise. Perhaps she was already so depressed and broken that she simply could not break any more. Or perhaps she finally felt free from her brother's grasp, and, once again, she could begin to write for herself as an unappreciated poet, unknown to the world.

Sample Works Cited

Works Cited

- “Discover Dove Cottage.” *Discover Wordsworth*, The Wordsworth Trust, [wordsworth.org.uk/visit/dove-cottage.html](http://www.wordsworth.org.uk/visit/dove-cottage.html).
- Lee, Edmund. “Dorothy Wordsworth: The Story of a Sister’s Love.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, edited by Janet Mullane and Robert Thomas Wilson, vol. 25, Gale, 1989. *Literature Resource Center*.
- Levin, Susan M. “Dorothy Wordsworth.” *British Romantic Prose Writers, 1789-1832: First Series*, edited by John R. Greenfield, Gale, 1991. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 107. Literature Resource Center*.
- Scott, Hess. “Three ‘Natures’: Teaching Romantic Ecology in the Poetry of William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, and John Clare.” *Romantic Circles*, edited by Niel Fraistat, U of Maryland, Dec. 2006, www.rc.umd.edu/pedagogies/commons/ecology/hess/hess.html.
- “Sister Act: A New Take on Dorothy Wordsworth.” *Weekend All Things Considered*, 22 Mar. 2009. *Literature Resource Center*.
- “The Woman Behind the Man.” Review of *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, by John Mullan. *The Guardian*, edited by Katherine Viner, Guardian News and Media, 5 July 2002, www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/06/classics.williamwordsworth.
- Woof, Pamela. “Dorothy Wordsworth as a young woman.” *Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2007, p. 130+. *Literature Resource Center*.

Wordsworth, Dorothy. "Grasmere Journal, 15 April 1802." *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth: The Alfoxden Journal 1798, The Grasmere Journals 1800-1803*, edited by Mary Moorman, Oxford.

Wordsworth, William. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." *Poetry Foundation*, 1804, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45521.