
Identity Through Affiliation and the Gender Division of the British Romantic Period

Dorothy Wordsworth, poetess, diarist, and sister of William Wordsworth, a well-known Romantic author, was not recognized as a notable literary figure until well after her death in 1855. Despite her close connection with her brother, her strong friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and her general involvement in the Romantic literary community, Wordsworth's own writings were largely kept private with the exception of a few anonymous publications in 1815 in her brother's collection of poetry, *Poems*. Even after the posthumous publication of her journals, *The Alfoxden Journal* and *The Grasmere Journals*, in 1897 and the even later publication of her poetry in 1987, her position as an author seems overshadowed by her brother's prestige. Still, Wordsworth's writing is deserving of some degree of reverence as it offers unique insight into the life and mind of a nineteenth century woman. Never intending for her journals to be published, the intimacy of Wordsworth's writing reveals small details about herself, her brother, and the time period that would have otherwise been lost to history. The small details contained in Wordsworth's *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere Journals* expose larger truths about nineteenth century British society concerning gender, identity, and expression.

Wordsworth focuses the larger part of her writing on recording small, seemingly insignificant details about weather, food, and foliage. Almost every entry in Wordsworth's journals details the weather to some extent. Sometimes she tells about the weather with great specificity so that readers can easily visualize the environment that she describes, while other times she includes simple, brief descriptions of daily weather conditions in passing. Writing in her *The Grasmere Journals* on April 15, 1802, Wordsworth describes a storm in a short yet vivid manner. She writes, "It was a threatening, misty morning, but mild. [...] The bays were stormy, and we heard the waves at different distances, and in the middle of the water, like the sea. Rain came on" (409-410). Because she so consistently records the weather conditions in her writing, whether she directly addresses the weather conditions or gives a quick overview, it may be assumed that Wordsworth was connected with, or in some way moved by, the conditions of her environment. While these small details about such things as the weather seem trivial, it may be contended that these small details were integral parts of Wordsworth's life. Anne Kostelanetz Mellor, author of *Romanticism & Gender*, a book that examines the gender-based differences among writers of the British Romantic period, notes, "When we look at this female-authored literature, we find a focus on very different issues from those which concerned the canonical male Romantic poets" (2). Because men and women of nineteenth century Britain had such vastly different social and domestic roles, it makes sense that they would write about different subject matter. Further, because women were confined to the private sphere as men ruled the

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public sphere, these Romantic women focused their attention on what they were most familiar with: domestic affairs.

It is likely that Wordsworth focuses on weather for two reasons. The first reason being the obvious Romantic convention of having a close connection with nature. This reason would account for the flowery presentations of weather conditions. The second reason may be that her daily work and wellbeing relied on the weather, and this would account for the seemingly meaningless inclusions of daily weather reports in her journals. Mellor points out the various domestic responsibilities held by Wordsworth: "Dorothy did the vegetable and flower gardening (sowing, weeding, harvesting, preserving), baking, laundry (washing, bleaching, drying, starching, ironing, folding), clothes-making and mending, shoemaking, housecleaning, wallpapering, whitewashing and wall painting, carpet binding, mattress making, carpentering and window glazing" (163). She likely focuses on the weather so consistently because it provided her food source, determined if she could wash and dry clothes, and more or less decided her daily activities. Jill Ehnne, author of "Writing against, Writing through: Subjectivity, Vocation, and Authorship in the Work of Dorothy Wordsworth," writes, "Dorothy's non-narrative, detail-oriented journal is not evidence of inferior artistic vision and/or arrested development, but should instead be read as evidence of her radical departure from William's view of the self and world" (75). In contrast to the writing of conventional masculine Romanticism, Wordsworth's writing was focused on the subject matter which impacted her life. She was not, like many Romantic men, concerned with transcendence; instead, she wrote about what she knew. By comparing Wordsworth's seemingly insignificant subject matter with the grand thoughts of spiritual transcendence that were often discussed by Romantic men, it becomes apparent that there was a divide between the two genders and their ways of life, thought, and identity.

In addition to her overwhelming amount of domestic responsibilities that decided how she spent her days, Wordsworth also provided help with her brother's writing. She was, without doubt, entirely devoted to William and his passions. Susan J. Wolfson, author of the article "William & Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other," notes the significance of the work that Wordsworth did for her brother:

She was the prized, constant interlocutor for his poetry, keeping journals that were resources of ideas, even phrasings for the poetry, conversing about the writing at hand, listening to it, editing it, and with other female hands, functioning as a ceaselessly transcribing and fair-copying (word-processors avant la lettre). Not just the spiritual superstructure but also the material infrastructure of William's career requires acknowledgment. (213)

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Throughout her journals, the bond between the Wordsworth siblings becomes quite obvious. Bordering on infatuation, Wordsworth's relationship with William seems to be of utmost importance to her. In fact, she declares in *The Grasmere Journals* that the reason she writes is because she wants to please William. On May 14th, 1800, she writes, "I resolved to write a journal of the time, [...] and I set about keeping my resolve, because I will not quarrel with myself, and because I shall give William pleasure by it when he comes home again" (406). It is apparent that Wordsworth's own self-definition was tied to her brother. Because women existed in the private sphere, it was their duty to provide as much assistance as possible for men to be successful in the public sphere. It was William who would be the face of the family, so Wordsworth provided as much help as she could to contribute to his happiness and success.

Wordsworth's journals help showcase how she identified herself. It is clear through the subject matter of her writing that the smallest details of the day greatly impacted Wordsworth's existence. As a woman of the nineteenth century, she was not permitted the same lifestyle as her brother and other Romantic men. Therefore, she did not identify or relate to the world in the same manner as these men did. Instead of philosophizing over the moon, Wordsworth writes about the practicalities of life that made her who she was. Regarding the form of self-definition that is found in Wordsworth's journals, one which is exterior rather than interior, Mellor notes the commonality of this sense of self among nineteenth century women:

The self that is written in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals* is one embodied in a routine of physical labor, of the daily production of food and clothing and shelter. [...] It is a self that derives its sense of well-being from its continuing connections with those significant others she herself carved, in a ideogram of relatedness. [...] It is a self built, as were many other nineteenth century women's selves, on a model of affiliation rather than a model of achievement. (166)

Because of the confining nature of gender roles in nineteenth century Britain, many women were restricted by their roles in the private sphere, and this resulted in women basing their identities on their familial and communal relationships and their own domestic responsibilities. Wordsworth's extreme devotion to her brother may be attributed to her desire to self-identify with his successes. Even after William's marriage, Wordsworth devoted her life to his family,

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even assisting in raising his children. Her connection to William, nature, her work, her food, and other small details that made up her life are the things that she writes about because these are the things that make up her identity.

Wordsworth's journals, *The Alfoxden Journal* and *The Grasmere Journals*, demonstrate a gender division between writers of the British Romantic period. The subject matter of her journals may be perceived as being trivial, but when the gender roles of nineteenth century Britain are taken into consideration, the subject matter seems appropriate. Wordsworth identified her self in relation to her domestic responsibilities and her familial and communal ties. Her frequent journaling of the weather, food, William's writing, and other observations about children and people living in the nineteenth century British countryside demonstrate the importance of these things to Wordsworth's identity. Because men and women served such drastically different roles, it is only appropriate that their writing differs in terms of subject matter, identity, and expression thereof. Wordsworth's journals illustrate these differences.

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