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ENG 251

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John Stuart Mill

Imagine growing up completely isolated with a strict father who only values education, logic, and utility. By age three you knew Greek, Latin by eight, and logic by twelve. At thirteen, you were expected to learn about political economy and live a life of complete utilitarianism. Friends were considered a distraction and there was no time for affection. John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher, lived this very life. It was the only life he knew and, as a child, he did not realize that this was not the way everyone around him lived. Now imagine having the revelation at twenty years old that this is not how everyone lives, that people around you *feel* things, have passions. John Stuart Mill's world and foundation came crumbling down upon this realization. He found himself in a state of depression and lethargy. Unable to articulate his feelings, he relied upon the writing of poet Coleridge to articulate them for him: "A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear / A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief, / Which finds no natural outlet or relief / In word, or sigh, or tear" (Mill 2). With nobody to turn to, because he had no friends and he certainly could not discuss this with his "stern and unyielding" father (McReynolds 6), Mill turned to what he knew best, reading. On a mission to find something, anything to help him out of this depression, Mill discovered the romantic poet, William Wordsworth. Wordsworth gave Mill hope, a hope that things in life, no matter how small, "could feel new" (Perry 116). Wordsworth's appreciation for nature

and life's natural beauty allowed Mill to *feel* while still analyzing, to accept nature for what it was while still attributing to it an analytical interpretation. Without Wordsworth's become-one-with-nature and appreciate-the-small-things ideals, Mill may never have found the courage that he needed to continue living.

Perhaps what troubled Mill most was his conclusion around age twenty that he “‘had been manufactured’ rather than growing up as a person should” (Perry 116). “Ask yourself whether you are happy,” he said, “and you cease to be so” (Mill 5). His intellectual ability to reason led him to the earth-shattering realization that he was incapable of feeling things. Kate McReynolds, a child clinical psychologist, hits the nail on the head when she describes Mill's dilemma: “He understood that feelings would make him happy, but he did not know how to have them.” He desperately wanted to talk to his father about this struggle, but knew that he would not understand (McReynolds 7). The disheartening feelings that accompanied this realization must have been nearly insufferable; after all, his father was his primary teacher and role model growing up. He felt incredibly alone, trapped inside his own mind. But Mill did not just give up to his depression. He set a goal: if within one year, he could not learn how to feel, he would take his own life, but he was going to give a valiant effort to try to avoid this fate.

John Stuart Mill's road to discovering how to develop emotions was not an easy one. To counteract his “lack of tenderness and neglect of his emotional world,” (McReynolds 6) he tried desperately to find comfort in literature. Having read the whole of Byron and finding that “the poet's state of mind was too like my own” (Mill 7), he tried a different romantic poet. In his desperation, he picked up for a second time, Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, which was just the right decision (Mill 8). He found the

poetry relatable and engaging. He appreciated how it explored “not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling” (Mill 8). Perhaps what Mill found so engaging was that, as a child, he would take walks in nature with his father, but always spent the time “reciting summaries of the day’s lessons” (McReynolds 6). This, however tedious and directed away from his surroundings, did allow Mill to develop a certain intellectual relationship with nature, and Wordsworth helped him to develop a more complete one. He took on a different attitude toward it and learned different lessons from it this time around. In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth offers that “imagination has something sacred about it” (Hartman). Rather than exploring complex education, Mill was now able to “draw from a source of inward joy...which could be shared in by all human beings” (Mill 8). This revelation gave Mill hope. Author George H. Hartman accurately describes *The Excursion*: “*The Excursion* offers us not a vision, but a voice.” Mill related to this style of writing because he was a conceptual scholar. “...I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed,” (8) asserted Mill on his analysis of the effect Wordsworth had on him. Perhaps what Mill liked so much about Wordsworth is that he could remain true to his didactic and analytical lifestyle by examining Wordsworth’s poetry while simultaneously learning to how to appreciate things for what they are in and of themselves. As a child, nature was something to study and classify but after rereading *The Excursion* nature became something to admire, which allowed him to mix both the intellectual and emotional aspects of life into a complete and satisfying experience.

It is important to distinguish, however, that Mill's sudden adoration of Wordsworth did not completely conflict with the ideals of his youth. He maintained his value of "reason and logic" and some of his contempt for "passionate emotions" (McReynolds 6). He still believed that many of life's problems should be addressed in a practical and logical manner. He merely realized that he was leading an "underdeveloped emotional life" and that he was unable to enjoy the little things in life (McReynolds 7). What he had to learn was that life was not about choosing intellect over emotion or vice versa, but rather to be able to recognize the power and importance of using both to evaluate and resolve issues. He always valued the "capacity to make choices rather than have other people make one's choices" (Perry 116).

What Mill found so compelling in Wordsworth's poetry was his concept of the imagination. He was able to apply the concept of the imagination in an analytical way. Wordsworth valued the imagination in his poetry but Mill took it one step further. "...The imaginative emotion which an idea when vividly conceived excites in us, is not an illusion but a fact, as real as any of the other qualities of objects," (Mill 10) he argues. He realized the joy in learning and that without finding joy in learning, it becomes more difficult and less engaging. The imagination is what prompts one to explore more and test the boundaries of one's knowledge.

Mill went on to publicly debate a contemporary scholar, Roebuck, who was the closest thing Mill had to a friend. Mill described him in his typically unemotional manner as "the person with whom at that time I was most in the habit of comparing notes on such subjects" (9). The two debated the "comparative merits of Byron and Wordsworth" (Mill 9). Roebuck argued that Byron's poetry was "regarded as the poetry

of human life, while Wordsworth's...was that of flowers and butterflies" (9). Perhaps the reason that Mill found Wordsworth's poetry more relevant at the time was that he was at an earlier stage of emotional maturity than Roebuck. He found happiness in the appreciation of the imagination, which to some may seem childish, and the gravity and complexity of the human condition, which defies practical solutions, may have been more than he was capable of embracing at that point, leading to his aforementioned opinion that Byron's "state of mind was too like my own" (Mill 7). The evidence of the success of Mill's journey is that this young man who grew up friendless and without confidante, unable to express emotion, ended up in a very successful relationship, which eventually resulted in marriage to Mrs. Harriet Taylor (Buckley 224). Not only was he able to love her but he grew to value heavily her opinion and support (Buckley 224). In his autobiography, he described her as "the one to whom most of all is due, one whom the world had no opportunity of knowing" (Buckley 224). A drastic change developed for Mill from something as simple as picking up a book of poetry. Depression conquered, Mill became a fully functioning member of society with a happy marriage full of love. The understanding that he gained and was able to share with others was evident in his changed philosophical awareness. The path of his emotional development through the words of Wordsworth allowed him to share his intellect with the world as a significant thinker of his time.

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