

The Prelude: As an epic poem. A modern epic.

P.G. Eng - sem. II - cl 6  
"For such an arduous work, I through myself

Make rigorous inquiry, the report

Is often cheering, for I neither seem

To lack that first great gift, the vital soul."

These self-analyzing poetic lines occur in the Prelude, the master piece of Romantic Poetry, composed by William Wordsworth, one of the great poets of English Language who is accorded the highest position among the Romantic poets of English literature. Wordsworth's poems reveal his poetic genius at its sublimity along with his uncommonly deep love for Nature. His poetic composition is the fine reservoir of the mental and emotional reactions of human beings with their natural surroundings. Here, in the given poem, he records the gradual growth of his mental, spiritual, emotional and creative power, in the superb and grand manners of poetic style. The literary critics, of course with certain differences of opinion, regard it as a unique autobiographical epic. Let us analyse it in a brief.

Generally, an epic poem, as evident from the great epics of the world, is a long tale in verse. The great men, or the national heroes or the prominent and eulogised personalities are leading protagonists whose great exploits and deeds are narrated in a lofty verse. There may be several digressions and different episodes but the unity is maintained among them for the central figure or the hero always stands supreme. The gods are always there to protect the heroes in the great moments of crisis. That is the supernatural elements do play important roles. The action and the exploits of the hero are noble and sublime. Hence, the diction and style are also required to be sublime.

Here, it is worth mentioning that John Milton



has been Wordsworth's poet-hero. So it is but natural for Wordsworth, a dedicated spirit, else sinning greatly, to take his epic seriously. In fact, it is Milton who <sup>has</sup> first widened the nature and scope of the subject of the epic poem. He has written great epic about man's moral rather than his military history. On the same pattern, Wordsworth also turns to find heroic argument in man's personal history. The following extract will make it more clear:-

"Sometimes it sueth me better to invent  
A tale from my own heart, more near akin  
To my passion and habitual thoughts."

In fact, a close observation and critical analysis of the Prelude reveals that in theme, style and structure, it has close resemblance to an epic poem. Of course, the theme, here, may be ~~conceived~~ <sup>perceived</sup> to be the loss of the Paradise of the Childhood. Again, this may be discerned to regain, in the end, that blessed stage through highly developed power of imagination and mystic ~~expression~~ <sup>experiences</sup> of inexplicable delight through contacts with sublime and beautiful aspects of nature. Therefore, we can say that the mind of the poet is the real hero of this modern kind of epic poem. In this context, Herbert Read remarks that the Prelude has a large measure of poetic unity because it has a single hero, the poet himself.

The Prelude is also a long poem like an epic, consisting of as many as fourteen books (though, book I only is prescribed for our study). It depicts the long voyage of discovery of a noble mind and soul. There is also a conflict but it is internal, rather a spiritual one. ~~See how beautifully, Wordsworth describes~~ This conflict is between his earnest desire to undertake the noble ~~deeds~~ <sup>tasks</sup> and his feeling of being incapable to do so. He says:-



" . . . . Thus my days are past  
 In contradiction; with no skill to part  
 Vague longing, haply bred by want of power  
 From paramount impulse not be withstood  
 A timorous capacity. . . . . "

Similarly, on the epic pattern, the poem is full of Variety and digressions. We find the interesting incidents of bird-nesting, bird-snaring, skating, kite-sailing, adventure in a stolen boat, horse-riding, bathing in the Lake etc. See how beautifully Wordsworth describes the event of bird nesting, when he hangs ~~over~~ above a raven nest and is supported by blowing wind: " ~~at~~

" . . . . Oh! when I have hung  
 Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass  
 And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock  
 But ill sustained, and almost (so it seemed)  
 Suspended by the blast that blew amain. "

No doubt, the deployment of supernatural machinery, in the manners of the traditional epics, has been avoided. Even then the idea of growing up 'fostered alike by beauty and by fear' and contemplating with awe that 'a towering peak illustrate the supernatural elements' in the poem in a powerful way.

" . . . . with purpose of its own  
 And measured motion like a living thing  
 strode after me. "

Furthermore, the Prelude is really a sublime and dignified poem for it has a simple and easy diction as well as a magnificent and grand style. The very preamble of Book I reminds us of Milton's style and the whole poem is full of the lofty utterances of Miltonic blank Verse. There is no dearth of Homeric similes too, For Example.

" . . . . . stood alone



(4)

Beneath the sky, as if I had been born  
On Indian Plains, and from my mother's hut  
Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport  
A naked savage, in the thunder shower."

Thus, we see that the Prelude, though not in the popular sense of the term, is a unique biographical biographical epic, produced by a matured creative genius like Wordsworth. It is really <sup>the</sup> greatest poem of English Language, grand in style, grand in subject and grand in execution.