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Katie Homar

John Carroll University University Heights, Ohio

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Keywords

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**“Passions That Were Not My Own”:
Critique and Preservation of True Pastoral Life in
Wordsworth’s “Michael”**

Katie Homar
John Carroll University
University Heights, Ohio

In “Michael: A Pastoral Poem,” William Wordsworth presents an old shepherd, Michael, who sacrifices his only son, Luke, to the city in a futile attempt to save the family’s land. The poem’s central symbol, the stones of Michael’s unfinished sheepfold, represents the broken bond between father and son, the death of the family’s lineage, the symbolic decay of old-fashioned values in the face of “modern” industrialism, and the general decline of a rural community. Further illustrating this sense of decline, the stones have blended back into nature, “beside the boisterous brook of Green-head Ghyll” (l. 16), and human beings no longer “notice” the stones or recognize their significance (482). Upon reading the poem, one contemplates the state of such families and communities;

is there any hope for rural values in a modern age or will they be entirely forgotten? While Wordsworth does not advocate retrogression in “Michael,” the poet does admire old values and attempts to reconcile them with new values. In bringing the story of Michael to urban readers, he is perpetuating, to the best of his ability, the memory of that shepherd and his rural community.

First, the fact that Michael, as a character, is a mixture of values implies that Wordsworth is not entirely retrospective. The poet admires Michael’s older agrarian values of love of the land, ancestry, community, and hard work. For example, the line “those fields. . . had laid strong hold on his affections” illustrates Michael’s love for his property (74-75). In the general traditional sense, the love and ownership of property link to feelings of independence; Michael’s cottage, “The Evening Star,” “[standing] single with large prospect,” and the subsequent description of the land’s boundaries seem to embody this independent ideal (133).

Unlike the growing materialism of the nineteenth century, “a little landed property is not only a matter of secure material welfare but it is also important in strengthening of family affections” (Wuscher 133). Moreover, as critic David Collings notes, these “affections” extend beyond the present family members, thereby uniting them with ancestors and future generations. Notably, Michael’s fields are inherited from his parents as they themselves received the land from their forefathers (224, 368). His son, Luke, represents a means to continue the tradition and the family’s con-

nection to the land through his descendents (Collings 559). Emphasizing this cycle of rural life, Michael states, “I but repay a gift which I myself / Received at other’s hands” (363-64). The creation of a shepherd’s staff for young Luke and Michael’s comment at Luke’s departure, “I wished that thou should’st live the life they lived,” further represent his commitment to ancestry and tradition (371).

In further relation to Michael’s love of family and ancestry, Wordsworth commends the old-fashioned sense of community that he represents. In the area surrounding Greenhead Ghyll, the people seem close-knit and considerate. For example, Isabel, Michael’s wife, relates how the town raised money for a “basket . . . filled with peddler’s wares” in order to send a boy, Richard Bateman, to the city, and “all the neighbors” bid farewell to Luke when he left for the city (262, 428). Additionally, Michael’s family and property become symbols of the locality and its values. For instance, the shepherds shear their sheep under the solitary oak near his cottage; this “Clipping Tree” becomes known and recognized in their “rural dialect” (168). Michael’s house also receives the name “Evening Star” due to the “constant light” produced by its revered, old lamp (136). Generally, Michael lives in a rural world with its own community and culture.

Furthermore, in keeping with the rural value of independence, Michael values hard work. Due to “an unusual strength,” Michael has the physical ability and mental dedication to perform hard work (455). The entire family is a paragon for such efforts,

and they spend the majority of their waking days performing the tasks needed to maintain the farm. Specifically, Michael indoctrinates Luke into hard work at an early age, and soon the boy, “not fearing toil, nor length of weary ways,” accompanies his father in all of the shepherd’s tasks (194). In addition, the family always persists in their labors, despite bad weather or the arrival of unfortunate news from abroad. For instance, after the news of his nephew’s debts, Michael “to the fields went forth,” and Isabel, his wife, begins preparations for Luke’s journey (284). Even in the farewell scene, Michael promises to “do his part” in the operation of the farm and continue with “all the works which I was wont to do alone, / Before I knew thy face” (395-396). After Luke’s desertion of the family, work becomes a means of emotional survival to the aged Michael, who persisting “as before/ Performed all kinds of labor” (457-58). Generally, “[his] lot is a hard lot,” but he remains “diligent” and dedicated to his shepherd’s duty until his death (233, 234).

In addition, the old shepherd also possesses a few “Romantic” traits, which develop from and enhance his older values. Specifically, Michael, through his daily career, has an intense, Wordsworthian link to nature. In addition to the pride of property in a traditional sense, he knows the landscape “like a book” and interprets the warnings from the “subterranean music” of the winds (70, 51). Like the poet, Michael has learned emotional lessons from the natural world which were “impressed. . . on his mind” (77-

78). Additionally, his traditional notions of family combine with Romantic beliefs. While Luke represents a “gift” and “hope” in the sense that he is an heir to the land, Michael seems to take a more emotional interest in his son than permitted by rural culture (146, 148); as the poet notes, his love was “exceeding” (151). The arrival of Luke, an infant with a “natural tune,” enhances his love of nature and makes the “old Man’s heart seem born again” (347, 203). As he teaches Luke the shepherd’s career in the fields, the two “played together” or had emotional experiences in nature (355). By including some Romantic traits in the character of Michael, Wordsworth shows his respect for the shepherd’s tradition, yet also demonstrates that the two value systems share some elements.

Yet, despite his admiration for older values, Wordsworth seems to voice his doubts about these rustic customs and their survival in a modern world: after all, “Michael” takes a social system’s collapse as its central theme. A close reading of Wordsworth’s poem thus reveals a more nuanced analysis of country life. Instead of simply defending rural culture, the poet suggests that, in addition to industrialism’s advent, flaws inherent in rural culture contributed to its own decline. To illustrate this downfall and expose possible causes, Wordsworth refutes several assumed conditions about rural culture and subliminally questions the system of familial obligation.

First, conditions in the poem undermine the presumptions surrounding the value of rural tradition. For example, the small farming town appears more dependent on the city than readers would first assume. On one level, the settlement is isolated “from the public way,” and the shepherds quietly tend their sheep in “a hidden valley,” surrounded by the natural world (1, 7). Yet, despite the seeming independence of Michael’s community, the story of Richard Bateman and Luke’s departure show a relationship with urban areas. Ironically, Luke must turn toward that “public way” in order to earn the money needed to save his family’s land and their way of life (427). Seemingly aware of this problem, Michael tells his son, “but it seems good / That thou should’st go,” and as Isabel’s testimony about Bateman hints, the family’s situation is not unique (381-82). Because “there is little money in the country,” small farmers must look to urban areas for support during this period of rapid economic change (Collings 570).

Further refuting a somewhat mythical status quo of proud families maintaining property over many generations, Michael reveals to Luke that “These fields were burthened when they came to me” (374). His admission is “news to the reader” because it undermines the legend of rural culture (Collings 555). In actuality, yeoman farmers, such as Michael, constantly fought to keep their property between the generations, and land holdings were always problematic. Specifically, Michael only owned “half” of his family’s land as a young man (376). He finally secured his holdings after a

hard struggle at age forty. Thus, the current threat to his land is not unusual and suggests a repetition of the events surrounding Michael's own inheritance.

More subliminally demonstrating the relationship between urban and rural areas and a break with tradition, Michael, as a character, is implicitly literate, despite a supposedly oral culture-based environment. Although David Collings notes that "literacy makes the ritual of oral transmission unnecessary" and contributes to the family's downfall, a sense of literacy was already apparent in the community because the written word plays an important role in Michael's story (568). He arranges the plan to save his land via a letter to a relative in a distant city. After Luke's departure, Michael and his wife anticipate a "good report" and "loving letters" from their son and kinsman (431, 433). Thus, literacy, as a form of communication, tacitly has a place in Michael's rural life.

Wordsworth not only undermines assumptions about rural areas but also cites concrete flaws in the rural tradition of obligation. Specifically, Luke travels to the city because he will work for a merchant relative in order to earn the money. A "friend in this distress," Michael's relative participates in an old system of familial obligation (248-249). In a rural bartering economy, families retained the medieval ideal of reciprocity. Despite the kinsman's "kind assurances," the very system of obligation has created Michael's predicament: Due to such traditions, he must pay the debts of a certain "brother's son," who has experienced

“unforeseen misfortunes” (307, 213). Although Michael later hints at the nephew’s hypothetical “evil choice,” the old shepherd is still obligated to re-mortgage his land in order to obtain the cash, regardless of his relative’s actions (237). Vowing that “the land / shall not go from us,” Michael decides to substitute Luke’s labor in the city to gain the money (244-245). Although “obligation . . . turns back into a source of support” through the merchant’s acceptance of Luke, this system constitutes the heart of Michael’s problems and forces the painful decision to send Luke away (Collings 560).

Moreover, the system of obligation in the rural tradition also leaves families in a static condition, with little progress across the generations. Although Michael “toiled and toiled” and the family embodied “a proverb in the vale / For endless industry,” they do not seem to benefit from their dedicated efforts (377, 94-95). Despite the passage of time, the family remains “neither gay perhaps / Nor cheerful” (373, 120-121). For instance, Michael laments the “little gain” that he has accomplished in over sixty years of labor, implying a need for progress beyond the work of his ancestors. Furthermore, Charles Rzepka has noted the symbolic use of the number zero in “Michael,” specifically the intended sheepfold’s shape, the “simplest form of which is a circle, an ‘O’” (210). In another sense, this feeling of emptiness could connote the lack of gain or progress inherent in rural traditions.

In further critiquing the rural notion of obligation, Wordsworth demonstrates the breakdown of ceremony and familial

affections through Michael's farewell to Luke at the site of the proposed sheepfold. Although it represents a coming of age and inheritance ritual for Luke, Michael must first dismiss the son from the land in order for him to eventually possess the property. According to Susan Eilenburg, Michael has, on a psychological level, actually alienated Luke from a family by rashly declaring at the moment that he hears of the nephew's debts that "the Boy should go tonight" (282). Through Michael's choice to help his nephew first, the system of obligation forces the old shepherd to displace his own son's interests in favor of a "rival child" (qtd. in Collings 556). Luke's "evil courses, ignominy and shame" (445) in the city typify his revenge, as "the true child, abandoned, takes on the characteristics of the rival" (qtd. in Collings 556). Thus, in spite of his good intentions for the extended family, Michael remains somewhat brainwashed by traditional beliefs and, therefore, does not realize his decision's negative impact on Luke, the family member who is closest to him.

Unaware of the psychological ironies, Michael carries out the ceremony in a typical manner, talking of his ancestors, warning Luke about the city, hoping for the future, and employing sentimental phrases such as "But, lay one stone . . . lay it for me" (386). He mentions "links of love" and a "covenant" (401, 414). Yet, other comments detract from Michael's seemingly upbeat tone and intimations of a father-son bond. For example, when describing the sheepfold, he states, "This *was* a work for *us*, and now, my Son, /

It is a work for *me*” (emphasis added 385-86). The shifting tenses and pronouns imply a broken bond and a one-sided action. Now that Luke is leaving, the sheepfold merely becomes another project for the old shepherd alone. Additionally, the “covenant” mentioned later in his speech is hypothetical (414): Providing that Luke returns from the city, he “wilt see” the proposed sheepfold, “a work which is not yet here” (413, 415). Therefore, the farewell ritual at the sheepfold seems to accomplish little for the father and son.

In general, Wordsworth’s “Michael” presents a system of rural conditions and values that “proves to be the source of its [own] undoing” (Collings 555). Ironically, familial obligation catalyzes Michael’s current problem, thereby threatening his land and alienating Luke as a means to save it. The family toils but gains little benefit, and each generation fights to keep the land. A ceremony fails to produce the expected results. Even Michael expresses a few doubts about his rural culture. Therefore, the mixture of values in the protagonist and ultimately flawed traditions demonstrate that Wordsworth does not wholeheartedly advocate these values nor does he have the intention of “promoting [...] plans for reactionary social reform,” in the form of a “back to the land” movement (Pepper 377).

On the other hand, Wordsworth seeks to raise “greater awareness of [...] ‘human nature’, and an intensification of certain ‘affections’” in urban audiences who have been dehumanized by industrialism, thus fulfilling his promise in the preface to *Lyrical*

Ballads (Pepper 371). Instead of political action, he intends to activate the audience's sympathetic imagination through "aesthetic education" in the story of Michael (Pepper 379). Wordsworth hopes that the readers will extend their specific sympathy in a fictional situation to a generic sympathy for humanity. Thus, for the poet, the universal sympathy represents a form of recompense for the individual tragedy in the poem. In his view, poetry is the solution to revive emotions and preserve the memory of rural communities.

As the poet, Wordsworth serves as an intermediary between the oral, rural past and the literate, urban present. First, the memories and traditions of rural peoples seem to be in decline. Since Michael, overcome with the grief at Luke's desertion, was unable to build the sheepfold, his piles of stones remain beside Greenhead Ghyll. The unhewn stones rapidly return to the natural environment "by the streamlet's edge," and any human connection with them vanishes after Michael's death (327). Moreover, when the land changes hands, the new owners tear down the cottage, and "the ploughshare has been through the ground / On which it stood," indicating that the site of the house becomes a field (477-478). Although the oak tree still survives, a symbol of nature, it, too, seems to have lost all cultural significance as the "Clipping Tree"; the poet simply refers to it as "the oak" at the end of the poem (479). As the older generations die and younger people, such as Luke and Richard Bateman, leave the area, the oral, rural traditions are lost; through geographic isolation and change, once-prominent local

landmarks become meaningless to the newer generations and outsiders.

Thus, the poet's task is to interpret these landmarks for others removed from the original events by time and place. The phrase "And to that simple object appertains / A story" directly implies the poet's interpretation and role in relating Michael's life to the audience (18-19). Supporting this role, Rzepka compares Wordsworth to a modern archaeologist (207). However, unlike a scientist who simply reports events, he also wishes to convey the values and emotions of the people through the landmarks, as part of the aesthetic education: "The poet, by reading this symbol, gives us the narrative which contains the conservative ideology" or the rural values of Michael (Pepper 377).

Wordsworth acts as the audience's "tour guide" to the isolated valley and land surrounding Greenhead Ghyll. Addressing the reader in the poem's introduction as "you," he directs the visitor's footsteps and attention to the stones of the unfinished sheepfold. Furthermore, he aspires to be a knowledgeable tour guide. Deviating from the stereotypical "Pastoral" of the poem's title, Wordsworth wants a more accurate story of the rural people's laborious lives and suffering in the wake of the Industrial Revolution: "In the place of poetic swains piping tunes on oaten flutes while tending picturesque sheep, Wordsworth supplies a family of quite real country shepherds" (Bradshaw and Ozment 18). Therefore, he hints at his knowledge of the area, identifying shepherds as "men /

Whom I already loved” (23-24). Striving for further accuracy, a gloss confirms Isabel’s memory of Richard Bateman and the location of a specific chapel that Bateman built with his fortune. Lastly, Wordsworth mentions that he “conversed with more than one who well / Remember the old man,” thereby providing testimony through interviews (451-52).

Yet, although phrases such as “our rustic dialect” and “our ancient, uncouth country style” as well as his childhood connection to the “Tale” support the poet’s inclusion in the rural community, Wordsworth does attempt to distinguish himself, as the artist, from the actual toiling shepherds (168, 111, 27). Fosso argues that “‘Michael’ does not assert an easy equivalence between poetic and manual labor,” and Bruce Graver similarly describes the connection between the two states as “ambiguous and necessarily uncertain” (qtd. in Fosso 160). One prominent example of this distance is the poem’s written form itself. Although David Collings protests that “the fact that oral tradition is sustained here in *written* form allies the narrator [...] with the forces that would destroy it,” a written poem is Wordsworth’s best attempt and only realistic means to convey Michael’s story to a literate, urban public (574). Wordsworth, an educated poet, strives to link himself and readers with the feelings of a fairly uneducated rural shepherd, in order to understand “passions that were not [their] own” (31). Politically, he recognizes that the Industrial Revolution is inevitable and a return to the past way of life is impossible, and since he cannot personally

give everyone a tour of Greenhead Ghyll, the written version of “Michael” represents an attempt to reach a larger audience.

Hence, in addition to his poetic purpose of eliciting sympathy for “man, the heart of man, and human life,” Wordsworth indirectly preserves the story of Michael and his community (33). The written form of the poem reaches an increasingly literate audience, thereby giving a voice to a fairly silent rural people. In reading Michael’s story, readers would sympathize with the old shepherd and likewise remember him. Just as Michael attempts to pass the land and shepherd’s profession to Luke through his supposed “covenant” at the proposed sheepfold, Wordsworth attempts to share the traditions of their ancestors with modern readers. Emphasizing this preservation and memory, Susan Wolfson explains that “we [the readers] join the community that can tell the tale”; the poet makes a “covenant” (qtd. in Fosso 160) with the readers in sharing the story of Michael’s decline. However, Wordsworth fears that “only a few natural hearts” will appreciate Michael’s story (36). At best, he wishes to record the memories of a rural community for the sake of his true “heirs,” the “youthful Poets” (38). Therefore, “Michael” serves as an inspiration for poets so that they may further share the stories of other rural people or “the concrete experiences of the Michaels of Northern England” (Wuscher 134).

Wordsworth’s “Michael” is not a reactionary nostalgic poem; although the protagonist possesses a mixture of admirable rural and Romantic values, the poet acknowledges that some of

these values caused the old shepherd's downfall. In writing Michael's story and acting as its narrator, Wordsworth represents a link between the rural past and the industrialized present; he serves as a tour guide, or interpreter, of local landmarks and events. By choosing to turn the material of an oral tale into a written poem, he hopes to reach a larger audience and thereby increase knowledge of rural traditions. While eliciting sympathy for general humanity in the Romantic tradition, Wordsworth becomes a type of historian, preserving the story of Michael and his way of life.

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