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Industrialization's Impact on Intelligence

Industrialization is a major theme that can be traced through a variety of time periods in literature. Numerous authors through a range of literary periods have explored this issue from many different aspects and angles. One such author from the Romantic literary period is William Wordsworth. He asserted in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) that industrialization was dampening the creativity of society and separating humans from nature. The Victorian author John Ruskin had similar views to that of Wordsworth. He also believed that industrialization was preventing society from fully making use of their creative powers, which he alluded to in his social critique *The Stones of Venice* (1853). Despite the fifty years between the two publications that allowed for society to become accustomed to industrialism, each author offers a testimony to the negative impacts of industrialism on the intelligence and creativity of the worker that remained consistent throughout the Romantic and Victorian literary periods.

Each author focuses on different channels through which intelligence and creativity is explored. Wordsworth tends to focus on the effects that industrialism has on the creativity within literature and the intelligence that results from the literature. Ruskin on the other hand, focuses on the effects that industrialism has on the worker specifically and the intelligence that he gains from his work as well as the creativity that the worker is able to employ while completing his work.

In order to understand each author's argument the reader must have a basic knowledge of the historical context of each piece. The Romantic period refers to the "middle to late eighteenth century through to the 1840s" (Bennett 124). Wordsworth was a witness to the drastically changing times that were taking place during this period. Society at this time was at the crossroads between a "postrevolutionary and preindustrial revolutionary Europe" (Blank 365). Britain's urbanized labor force was quickly growing which causes industrial cities to bloom to keep up with the imperialistic ventures of the country. The creation of products was being moved from the home into factories. This laid the ground for a social structure that connects society by the value that they place on consumer activity. Industrialism was just beginning to emerge at this time and many writers were expressing their distaste for the changing society through their literature, including Wordsworth (Blank 365-67).

During this time industrialization was also beginning to make the production and distribution of written materials much easier. It was becoming easier for more authors to be published and distribute their materials to the masses. This type of press production threatened to undermine the old order of literature production that discriminated between 'low' quality work and 'high' quality work. It was now becoming easier to publish something that was popular in nature but lacked true literary value, thus threatening the whole system of what constitutes true literature (Blank 374). This was an issue that greatly troubled Wordsworth.

In the Romantic period intelligence was being diminished due to the effects of industrialism. Wordsworth asserts:

"For a multitude of causes unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discrimination powers of the mind, and, unfitting it

for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.”(Wordsworth 266).

He claims that the most effective cause of this diminishment of the mind is due to the increasing industrialized work force that was starting to consume society at the time. The workers are performing jobs that are uniform, tedious, and allow no release for creative energy or independent thought, which he claimed dehumanized them. These workers were turned into machines rather than craftsmen. Wordsworth affirmed that these types of working conditions produced a worker that was conducive to and craved stimulation from the extraordinary, since he was unable to engage in stimulation of his mind while working. He states,

“The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies” (Wordsworth 266).

Kim Blank asserts, “emerging cultural practices are informed and driven by historical, industrial, technical, and urbanizing forces... forces, he [Wordsworth] believes, that at the same time debase human response and taste” (371). Wordsworth argued that because the worker was incapable of stimulating his mind at work he needed extraordinary or graphic incidents to gratify his thirst for this kind of intellectual stimulation (266). He did not, however agree that the sort of intelligence that resulted from graphic literature was healthy or appropriate for his society. He argued that instead of enlightening the reader and producing thought provoking stimulation these works only quenched the thirst for the graphic stimulation that the worker craved due to his lack of stimulation during his work. The literature that was emerging due to the reverberating effects of industrialism was not increasing society’s intelligence, but rather impeding it.

Industrialism was preventing intellectual growth within society due to its effects on literature. “To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves” (Wordsworth 266). Wordsworth is stressing that industrialization shaped literature in ways that do not support proper intellectual growth by conforming literature to appease the craving for this type of stimulation. Wordsworth argued that the human mind was “capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulation” (266). He declared that the literature he and his fellow poets produced were elevated above this type of extreme situational literature that emerged as a result of industrialism. He did not agree that the works were at equal intellectual levels or benefit the reader in the same way. He stresses that the emerging literature of Britain was developed to pacify these cravings for extreme stimulation not to actually increase the intelligence of society. In addition they were pushing more elevated literature that was considered classics into neglect (266). Wordsworth is tracing how the reverberations of industrialism are affecting society during the Romantic period.

Concerns with industrialism can continue to be traced through the Victorian period as well. The Victorian period spanned from about 1837-1901. This time was considered the height of the British Empire. “Goods were imported from every corner of the empire...to provide raw materials for the ‘workshop of the world’” (Keaney). The industrialism that started in the 18th century was well underway when the Victorian period started, and Britain was at the heart of it. Society was transformed during this time period due to industrialism and the middle class was growing rapidly (Keaney). In addition to the swift expansion of industry, the British Empire was also a time of great discoveries, innovations, explorations and strides in scientific progress which all contributed to a drastic change in societal behavior in both social and economic ways. This was a time marked by immense migrations from the rural villages to industrial cities, the boom

of factories, mass production, population growth, appearance of consumer societies, and class difference. There was a belief at this time that all of the scientific and technological advances brought a sort of optimism to the society. Some viewed scientific and technological growth as a 'savior' to mankind (Farahbakhsh 182-183). Just like any other time in history, when a new set of beliefs are established there are always some who react against the beliefs and try to advocate for a return to previous values. Ruskin was one such person. He often wrote on social issues extensively and condemned the capitalist system of his time (Badertscher).

The working conditions of industrial workers continue to have direct negative effects on intelligence and creativity throughout the Victorian period. Ruskin stresses in *The Stones of Venice* the flaws of organized labor and how these flaws affect the worker. He believes that the ideal working class is created through ideal working conditions (Breton 214), which did not exist during Ruskin's time. Ruskin essentially establishes the "inherent value and rights of the worker" (Breton 211). Ruskin argues that everyman who is utilized by manual labor, no matter where he came from, who he is, or how he behaves has the capacity in him for better things than the labor he partakes in: "In the make and nature of every man, however rude or simple, whom we employ in manual labor, there are some powers for better things: some tardy imagination, torpid capacity of emotion, tottering steps of thought" (Ruskin 1327). He asserts that in order for the worker to fully develop his innate capacity of intelligence then we must look within them for their talents and uniqueness and allow them to utilize these skills no matter what possible errors come with these skills (1327). If this is not done and the worker is not allowed to utilize his distinctive skills, he will lose his intellectual capacity because every ounce of energy and spirit within the worker must be exerted in order to execute unified manual labor which leaves no energy or spirit left for him to exert his unique creativity and intelligence on his own.

“The eye of the soul must be bent upon the finger point, and the soul’s force must fill all the invisible nerves that guide it, then hours a day, that it may not err from the steely precision, and so should an sight be worn away, ant he whole human being be lost at last—a heap of sawdust, so far as its intellectual work in this world is concerned” (Ruskin 1328).

Ruskin argued that if the creativity and intellectual capacity of the worker was neglected he would lose those assets entirely. Industrial workers were forced during this time to complete robotic tasks that required little to no intellectual thought or stimulation. Ruskin is illuminating this issue and examining how the same lack of intellectual stimulation in the workplace is still affecting workers fifty years after Wordsworth.

Industrialism created machines instead of intelligent men by restricting men of their use of intellectual and creative capacity while working. Ruskin argued that the worker’s intelligence and creative capacities must be strengthened by his work not weakened. He stressed that the only way for those capacities to be strengthened was for them to be accepted and utilized. These skills, although imperfect must be valued above the precision of manual skill that exists in the industrialized world (Ruskin 1327). Ruskin was reacting to the popular belief of his time that everything must be perfect and uniform. He throws that idea out and instead says that in order for real men to be created with the capacity to think and work using his mind then the flaws that come with his work must be accepted. Ruskin argued:

“You can teach a man to draw a straight line, and to cut one; to strike a curved line, and to carve it; and to copy and carve any number of given lines or forms with admirable speed and perfect precision; and you find his work perfect of its kind: but if you ask him to think about any of those forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head, he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and then to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first

touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that. He was only a machine before, an animated tool” (Ruskin 1328).

“You can either make a tool of the creature or a man of him. You cannot make both” (Ruskin 1328). A man is made when he is capable of thinking for himself and using unique creative capacities. A man is an intelligent being that is creative and unique not a unified creature who is repetitious in nature and incapable of independent thought. Men are dehumanized when they are forced to work with accuracy and tools. Ruskin argues that it is not natural because men by nature are flawed, and therefore by forcing them into this situation in dehumanizes them and turns them into mechanical creatures. The industrial system at the time however, does not allow for this sort of creative intellectual thought. The system that was in place required that the uniformity and lack of creativity be in place. Industrialism at this time did not allow for the strengthening of intellectual capacities; it only allowed for the weakening of them.

Industrialism went against man’s natural capacities to be individualized and creative. Ruskin argued that the unified labor that industrialism forces upon its workers chokes their souls and blights their intelligence in order to make them slaves to their work (Ruskin 1328). Man is creative, intelligent, and unique by nature. In forcing him to become a homogeneous being you are going against his natural capacities. His soul craves to release these natural creative capacities, but they are restrained with uniformity until they no longer exist. Ruskin argued that this restraint exists until the worker has only enough intelligence left in him to only make a part of a whole, but not the whole itself:

“The labour that is divided; but the men: Divided into mere segments of men— broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin, or the head of a nail.” (Ruskin 1330)

They are only capable of making the part that they have been forced to do; they no longer have the intellectual capacity in them to broaden their mind and determine how to make the whole, because their soul has been choked and their intelligence has been blighted. Ruskin is trying to offer a societal critique of how industrialism is suffocating the intellectual capacities of the worker by forcing them into repetitious and tedious work that does not engage the mind.

Instead of the new age of industry strengthening the society and offering them a chance to enhance their intellectual and creative capacities it stifles them until they are nonexistent. Ruskin argues that Industrialism focuses on every other aspect of creation and development except the development of the intellectual mind. “We manufacture everything except men...but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages” (Ruskin 1330). Industrialism at this time was not interested in producing intelligent men; it was solely concerned with the product. The materialism that centered the industrial society mattered more than the intelligence of the workers.

Throughout both time periods each author is reacting to the negative impacts that they have witnessed of industrialism on the intellectual growth of their society. Wordsworth offers his readers the perspective of the Romantic time period. Along with Ruskin, he believes that industrialism has the capacity to smother out intellectual and creative capacities within the worker, because it fails to facilitate an environment that is intellectually or creatively stimulating for the worker. Both authors believe that by stifling man’s creative and intellectual powers industrialism is turning workers into dehumanized machines that are incapable of producing independent creative thought. In addition, they also both critique uniformed labor for its failure to stimulate the worker and engage it in creative and intellectual processes.

Although each author agrees on the various flaws of uniformed labor, each offers their reader very different solutions. Wordsworth's solution is not quite as direct as Ruskin's, but if one digs into what he is trying to say in the Preface he offers a possible solution for the lack of stimulation and intellectual/creative growth that takes place in the factory. Wordsworth offers literature as a way to stimulate the mind and achieve intellectual and creative growth. He warns against the popular writings that are 'grotesque' because they offer little to no intellectual stimulation and lack creativity. However, he does advocate the use of classical and 'valuable' literature as a way to achieve this growth that is severely deprived in the work environment (Wordsworth 271). Ruskin also offers his readers a solution, but he takes it one step further than Wordsworth. Instead of focusing on how the worker can compensate for the deficiencies that he is subjected to at work, he attacks the issue straight on and offers a clear solution to change the way the worker performs his work. Ruskin advocates to change the problem at its root, not just compensate for it. He advocates a change to take place within the workforce that will allow for the intellectual and creative stimulation that the worker needs. He calls for each worker's skill to be prized and honored even though they have flaws (Ruskin 1327). Ruskin pleads for the factories to start producing men by allowing them to think for themselves and use their innate sense of creativity within their work. He asserts that if done, the workers will become men and their intelligence and creative capacities will grow (Ruskin 1334).

If each author is used as a sample to represent the whole of their literary period, then the reader can see that many of the same ideas stay consistent throughout the two periods. Many of the concerns seem to be the same in the two periods, such as the lack of intellectual and creative stimulation in the factory and the forces that act to dehumanize and suffocate the intelligence of the worker. However, Wordsworth focuses more on literature where as Ruskin focuses on the

individual worker. The main difference that you can see throughout the two works are the conclusions that each author's draws. Wordsworth offers a solution that only addresses the surface of the issue, whereas Ruskin's solution offers a way to correct it at its very root. Although significant time has elapsed between the two authors, the issues remain constant because nothing was ever changed. Industrialism continued to grow even stronger without modification to the system of production and worker conditions. Although fifty years have lapsed between Wordsworth's Preface and Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, industrialism continued to have negative impacts on the intelligence and creativity of the worker.

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