



English 112

Poetry Essay

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### Materialism in the Poetry of Wordsworth, Hardy, and Mayers

Materialism describes people's tendency to desire physical possessions rather than spiritual values for their comfort. Nikolai Bukharin, a Russian politician in the early 1900s, believed that: "Socially, spiritual values are considered more important to human existence." There has been a general trend of change within the society towards becoming more materialistic as the demand for tangible things increases. Individuals are more focused on their image and money than ever before, as they perceive these things to show their social status. William Wordsworth, in "The World Is Too Much with Us," criticizes this focus on materialism rather than nature, while Thomas Hardy, in "The Convergence of the Twain," writes that the occurrence of disaster cannot be foretold by the human mind (for instance, sinking of the unsinkable steamship *Titanic*). And Florence Cassen Mayers, in "All-American Sestina," writes that materialism is all that is contained in the American dream and highlights the very elements which define the dream as people emphasize on quantity and not quality.

The economic principle of materialism requires that people work in order to earn a living. As a result, there is a shift in the values that people have, as they seem to desire material wealth rather than spirituality. Wordsworth criticizes this change, as he believes that materialism is driving people away from nature. The author suggests that people have more power provided by nature, but they waste that power focusing on gaining material possessions: "Little we see in Nature that is ours." People fail to realize the potential they have and hence miss numerous opportunities presented to them; people are immensely focused on acquiring and consuming goods and services within the economic system. When Wordsworth writes about "getting and spending," he is saying that society is losing its values (Wordsworth & Van Doren, 2001). Wordsworth seems to understand the economic shift, he considers "getting and spending" as being out of tune with nature or as focusing solely on the material things.

Through the increased focus on self-interest, the element of self-destruction is introduced. Gong Sun writes: "As the modern society becomes more materialistic, the love for self continues to increase and personal interests become the element which drives social motives." Self-interest is represented in the failure of the manufacturers to consider external forces when making the *Titanic*. Hardy in "The Convergence of the Twain" writes that the pride of life was the cause of the sinking of the ship: "Deep from human vanity, And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she." Pride overcame the forces of reasoning and consequently caused people to make a miscalculation. Materialistic focus can result in people losing direction and focusing on elements which do not have much value to them. Hardy writes: "Jewels in joy designed, to ravish the sensuous mind." The poem generally points out that the vanity and pride of humans cannot be compared to the forces of nature.

Materialism also can be associated with the American dream; the focus on material things becomes the element which divides the American society. Mayers' poem "All-American Sestina" begins with the words: "One nation, indivisible." This statement is presented ironically; with modern

society focused on material gains, the presence of these gains affects the unity of the nation. Stanley Aronowitz, a professor of sociology and cultural studies at the City University of New York, writes: "The materialistic nature of people creates a social difference where some people have more resources than others." According to "All-American Sestina," this is not a good trend as it threatens the values that should bind the nation together. Mayers provides numbers to everything that people value: "one-night stand, two-pound lobster"; "five-karat diamond and the six-pack bud."

The association of everything to a certain number is aimed to ensure that every person in the society understands the worth of the item, even if they have never used it. As a personality trait, materialism is characterized by possessiveness: people have become obsessed with the number of things that they have instead of focusing on their quality. The author focuses on numbers one to six as being used to determine the quantity of many things discussed in the poem. While the author does not convey her stand on the ethical perspectives of the issues raised, it is clear that she is writing about materialism. The author maintains a neutral tone to allow the reader to develop their own opinion in regard to the issues raised in the poem.

Wordsworth, Hardy, and Mayers present different perspectives on the same social problem. Although the poems have been written at different times, they contain a common message: social changes have made the world lose the connection with nature and concentrate on material gains instead of spiritual. The authors considered this path a dangerous one for the humankind to follow. Popularity of the topic of materialism in poetry serves as an indication of relevance of the topic to the modern society. In general, it's the possessive nature of people that makes them highly attached to the material things around them.