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**Topic: The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk**

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**By: Prof. Sunita Sinha**

**Head, Department of English**

Women's College Samastipur

L.N.M.U., Darbhanga

**Email:** [drsunitasinha@gmail.com](mailto:drsunitasinha@gmail.com)

**Website:** [www.sunitasinha.com](http://www.sunitasinha.com)

**Mob No:** 9934917117



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## **“THE SOLITUDE OF ALEXANDER SELKIRK”**

### **WILLIAM COWPER: THE POET**

- Regarded as the forerunner of English Romantic Poetry, William Cowper wrote in the eighteenth century drawing from the day to day experiences of his life.
- Mostly noted for his poetry on nature, William Cowper was a notable poet and essayist who also wrote hymns. His poetry had the flavour of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Let us read through the life and works of this great poet.

## **HIS WORKS**

- William Cowper is best remembered for the poem “The Diverting History of John Gilpin” as well as his hymns. The major theme of this work is the need for salvation of human beings. Some of the hymns are “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood”, “To Jesus, the Crown of My Hope”, “O Lord! in Sorrow I Resign”, “There is a Safe and Secret Place”, to name a few.
- His famous poem” “The Diverting History of John Gilpin” is a comic piece published in 1782. The volume Poems by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq. was published in 1782.
- In 1785, William Cowper’s” “The Task”- a poem of about five thousand lines written in blank verse was published and received wide critical acclaim. This was one of the remarkable treatments of the themes such as man and nature.

## **THE EXPLANATION OF THE POEM**

- The poem is based on Alexander Selkirk, a sailor from Fife, Scotland. He ran away from home at the age of nineteen to be left alone on a deserted and uninhabited island in Chile following a feud with a young captain. Even though he asked his shipmates to join him, he was refused by all and had to spend four years of his life at the island alone which had no sign of human life in it. Many writers had been influenced by Alexander Selkirk’s adventurous stay at the

island which was called Juan Fernandez. He was however accompanied by goats and cats, the animals which earlier survived shipwrecks. He spent his life there hunting and was completely engrossed in reading the Bible until he was rescued four years later by an English ship.

- William Cowper's poem is a direct address to the story of this sailor's life in the island. Cowper must have consulted many books written on Alexander Selkirk. However, his poem throws interesting light on the relationship of man with nature.
- The first stanza begins with the solitude life of the sailor in the island where there is no one to disrupt or interfere him. Being the only human presence, he is the king of the island. He is, however, filled with regret for his decision of staying in the island. It is evident from these line: "Better dwell in the midst of alarms,/Than reign in this horrible place."
- The sailor regrets that he has nobody to share his grief too. He is out in such a faraway place where the possibility of human vegetation is less. Cut off from the society, he assured himself that he had to reside there all alone by himself. He longs to hear the "sweet music of speech" for there was no one he could talk to.
- He reflected on the point that the island had never before seen the presence of human beings because he found that even the beasts look at him "with indifference". He longs for "Society, Friendship and Love" which are solely humanly affairs. He imagined how he could have escaped if he had wings like the Dove. His sorrows might then be lessened by the new hope he would find in religion and he would

learn from his “wisdom of age,/And be cheer’d by the sallies of youth.”

- The fourth stanza reflected his utter desolation and his eagerness to go back to a life he earlier had lived with friends and family. Out of frustration he asked the wind to convey his message to his dear ones about how he missed them. The sailor’s imagination is at full play in this stanza.
- The fifth stanza is the sailor’s return to his reality. Cowper beautifully describes the imaginative power of Selkirk as “How fleet is a glance of the mind” and emphasized on the fact that it could not last forever. The sailor had to accept his self-chosen fate. The poem ends with a note of hope for human beings are strong enough to survive in all situations and what encouraged the sailor is the hope that mercy still pervaded. This strong bent of mind led to the survival of the sailor in the island even after four years. In spite of the hopeless situation, Alexander Selkirk’s determination and courage to survive has been an inspiring story for many writers. Through the poem, William Cowper manages to throw light on human trials and the necessity of courage and will to survive.

## **MAJOR THEMES**

- Let us discuss some of the major themes evident in the poem.
- **Power of Imagination** The most dominant theme of the poem is the power of imagination. Stuck in an uninhabited island alone, Alexander Selkirk spent four years of his life alone. Devoid of other human lives, he was compelled to live alone. His only activities were hunting goats and reading the Bible. It was, however, the flights of

imagination of the sailor that had saved him from breaking down completely. He found solace in imagining about his friends, their love and companionship. Although he is aware of his reality yet his imaginative bent of mind helped him to survive in such a deserted island. The company he had in the island comprised only animals. Cowper emphasized how one's imaginative power can lead him/her to the source of happiness. If not permanent yet a temporary relief was found by the lonely sailor which encouraged him to struggle to live until finally rescued. Man's relation to Nature and Society Another theme evident in the poem is man's relation to nature and the society.

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