



Rural Existence and Moral Economy in William Wordsworth's "Michael"

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Abstract: William Wordsworth's "Michael: A Pastoral Poem" presents rural existence not simply as a pastoral ideal but as a way of life sustained by land, labour, family responsibility, inherited memory and economic independence. At the centre of the poem is an old shepherd whose attachment to his estate cannot be understood in purely financial terms. The land represents ancestral labour, domestic continuity and the future that Michael hopes to secure for his son Luke. This article reads these relationships through the concept of moral economy, using the term to describe an order in which economic value remains closely connected with social obligation and familial responsibility. The financial crisis that threatens Michael's estate reveals the fragility of this order. His decision to send Luke away is intended to preserve the family property, yet the separation removes the future heir from the household, landscape and shared labour through which his relation to that inheritance has developed. The unfinished sheepfold becomes the most powerful material expression of this failure. It begins as a practical agricultural structure, becomes a covenant between father and son, and finally survives as a memorial to interrupted inheritance. Through close attention to land, labour, property, domestic life and memory, the article argues that "Michael" neither merely celebrates rural simplicity nor simply condemns social change. Wordsworth instead examines how a meaningful rural existence becomes vulnerable when economic necessity separates the material conditions of inheritance from the human relationships that give inheritance its value.

Keywords: William Wordsworth; "Michael"; rural existence; moral economy; pastoral; land; labour; inheritance; memory.

1. Introduction

William Wordsworth begins "Michael: A Pastoral Poem" with an object that might easily escape notice. A traveller entering Green-head Ghyll sees sheep, rocks, water and, beside the brook, "a straggling heap of unhewn stones" (ll. 16–17). Nothing in the stones immediately reveals why they deserve attention. Their importance becomes visible only when the narrator tells the history associated with them.

The arrangement is significant. Wordsworth allows the reader to encounter the remains of Michael's world before introducing Michael himself. The material trace survives, while the human relationships that once gave it meaning have disappeared. The poem therefore begins not only with landscape but with the problem of memory. How does a place preserve the lives that have passed through it? What survives when family continuity has failed?

The narrator describes Michael's story as "Homely and rude" (l. 35), yet the apparent simplicity of the tale should not be confused with insignificance. Such stories, Wordsworth explains, taught him to think about "man, the heart of man, and human life" (l. 33). An obscure rural household becomes capable of carrying questions about affection, work, responsibility, inheritance, sacrifice and loss.

Michael is introduced through a combination of bodily endurance and practical intelligence. He is "An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb" (l. 42). His mind is "Keen, / Intense, and frugal," and he is exceptionally watchful in his work as a shepherd (ll. 44–47). His character has developed through a lifetime of responsibility. The hills surrounding him are not

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picturesque scenery detached from daily existence. They are places in which he has worked, faced danger, acquired knowledge and raised his family.

Much criticism of "Michael" has recognised that the poem is more complicated than a sentimental celebration of rustic simplicity. Discussions by Marjorie Levinson, Susan Eilenberg, W. Thomas Pepper, Mark Jones, Peter Manning, Stuart Peterfreund, Fiona Stafford, David Simpson and other scholars have drawn attention to its economic, ideological, pastoral, familial and historical dimensions. More recent criticism has continued to examine the relation among rural life, labour, memory and historical change.

The importance of these studies makes it unnecessary to claim that the economic character of "Michael" has somehow been neglected. A more precise question can be asked. What kind of relationship does Wordsworth establish among economic value, family affection and inherited responsibility?

The concept of moral economy provides a useful way of approaching this question. E. P. Thompson famously used the term in his study of eighteenth-century popular expectations concerning economic conduct. Thompson's historical argument concerns circumstances very different from those represented in "Michael," and the poem should not be forced into his specific model. The concept is useful here in a more limited sense: economic relations may carry moral expectations that cannot be reduced to market price.

Michael's estate is valuable in precisely this way. It can be sold and assigned a monetary value, yet its meaning to him cannot be expressed adequately in financial terms. The land has been inherited. It carries the labour of earlier generations and the work of Michael's own lifetime. It sustains his household and represents the future he imagines for Luke.

Labour possesses a similar doubleness. It supplies material needs, but it also shapes character and creates relationships. Luke learns rural responsibility not primarily through instruction but by accompanying his father and participating in the work of the household.

- Inheritance consequently means more than receiving land.
- Luke is expected to inherit a relationship to land.

The distinction becomes crucial when debt places Michael's estate at risk. In order to preserve the property for his son, Michael sends that son away. The decision is understandable, even reasonable, yet it contains the contradiction that eventually destroys the hoped-for succession.

Wordsworth's tragedy develops from that contradiction.

2. Land, Property and Family Memory

For Michael, property is inseparable from history.

Wordsworth's letter to Charles James Fox of 14 January 1801 provides a useful context. Discussing small independent landholders in northern England, Wordsworth connects inherited estates with domestic attachment and family continuity. The land, in his account, gives permanence to relationships extending across generations. This understanding of rural property appears throughout "Michael."

When Michael learns that he must meet a serious financial obligation after standing surety for his brother's son, his first practical possibility is to sell part of his estate. Wordsworth describes the fields as "patrimonial" (l. 224). The adjective is important.

Michael is not considering the sale of property acquired casually or recently. The fields belong to a history of descent. Their value exists partly because they came from earlier generations and are expected to pass to another.

A purely economic calculation would treat their sale as a rational method of meeting debt. Michael cannot view them in this way. He tells Isabel that if they should pass into "a stranger's hand," he doubts whether he could "lie quiet" in his grave (ll. 230–32).

The imagined disturbance of his grave may seem excessive if property is understood only as possession. It becomes more comprehensible when the estate is understood as continuity.

Michael does not experience himself as the isolated owner of an asset. He stands temporarily between earlier and later generations. He has inherited both land and responsibility.

The poem does not require us to accept his attachment uncritically. Wordsworth is representing a particular social class: small landed proprietors capable of sustaining a degree of household independence. The experience of landless agricultural workers would necessarily be different. The rural moral order of "Michael" is therefore not a complete representation of rural society.

Nevertheless, within the household Wordsworth constructs, property gives stability to a particular way of life.

Michael works the same land that he intends Luke to inherit. His labour does not merely increase its financial value. Work strengthens his sense that the land belongs to a history larger than himself.

This is one reason selling part of it appears morally different from selling another commodity.

Money obtained from the transaction could compensate for economic value.

It could not recover continuity.

Raymond Williams's analysis of the cultural meanings attached to country and city helps prevent an excessively nostalgic interpretation. Rural society should not be imagined as existing outside markets, money or social change. "Michael" itself offers evidence against such an assumption.

Michael has participated in a financial arrangement.

He has stood surety for another man.

A failure elsewhere creates a claim against his property.

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The economic world from which his family will later suffer is therefore already connected with rural life.

The crisis does not begin in the city.

It begins within a network of kinship and financial obligation.

This detail gives the tragedy greater complexity. Wordsworth does not present economics as an external force suddenly entering an innocent valley. He shows how relationships that appear moral and familial can themselves produce economic vulnerability.

3. Labour and Rural Knowledge

If property supplies the material foundation of Michael's household, labour gives that property human meaning.

Wordsworth pays unusual attention to Michael's practical competence. The old shepherd has learned "the meaning of all winds" (l. 48). Weather that encourages other people to seek shelter may send him towards the mountains because the animals under his care require attention.

His knowledge is acquired through necessity.

Michael does not simply admire nature. He has learned how to live within it.

This distinction is central to Wordsworth's treatment of rural existence. The landscape has become meaningful through action. The mountains preserve memories of "hardship, skill or courage, joy or fear" (l. 69). Michael remembers the hills through the events that occurred there.

His emotional attachment is therefore inseparable from work.

The same connection develops between Michael and Luke.

Once Luke is strong enough to accompany his father into the mountains, shared labour changes their relationship. Objects already familiar to Michael become more precious because they are experienced in the presence of his son.

Luke is gradually becoming more than a child whom Michael loves.

He is becoming a companion and possible successor.

This development is important because Wordsworth presents inheritance as something learned before it can be received.

Luke does not wait for Michael's death to begin becoming an heir. He enters the inheritance through work.

He walks the landscape.

He assists his father.

He participates in household tasks.

He learns the rhythms of rural life.

Such knowledge cannot simply be transferred at the moment property changes legal ownership.

This is one of the most important distinctions in the poem.

Land can be transferred through inheritance.

A relationship with land cannot.

That relationship has to be formed.

Wordsworth's description of domestic labour reinforces the point. Michael, Isabel and Luke are joined by work within the cottage as well as outside it. Their household is famous in the valley for its "endless industry" (ll. 94–95).

The word does not describe industrial production. It describes continuity of effort.

The old lamp in the cottage has accumulated meaning because it has witnessed "uncounted hours" of family activity. Its importance comes from use and duration rather than monetary worth.

Wordsworth repeatedly writes about ordinary things in this way.

Fields.

Tools.

A lamp.

Stones.

Their emotional value develops through repeated human contact.

This attention to objects is particularly important in a poem concerned with economic change. Commodity exchange requires things to be comparable through price. Wordsworth continually presents things whose meanings exceed such comparison.

One field may possess the same monetary value as another.

It does not follow that the two fields possess the same history.

One stone may resemble another.

The stone placed by Luke in the sheepfold cannot simply be replaced by a different stone without changing the emotional meaning of the action.

The poem therefore places exchange value beside remembered value without pretending that one can be reduced to the other.

Isabel also belongs centrally to this economy of work. Wordsworth repeatedly describes her spinning and domestic activity. Her labour helps sustain the household whose continuity Michael hopes Luke will inherit.

This point deserves emphasis because a discussion of inheritance centred exclusively on father and son can easily make Isabel appear secondary.

She is not secondary to the functioning of the household.

The legal direction of property may be patriarchal, but the life attached to that property is collectively sustained.

The rural moral economy of "Michael" therefore depends upon forms of labour that inheritance law alone cannot describe.

4. Debt and the Separation of Luke

The financial crisis changes the structure of the household.

Michael has stood surety for his brother's son. When that relative encounters unexpected difficulties, Michael becomes responsible for a considerable forfeiture.

Wordsworth introduces the crisis as "Distressful tidings" (l. 209), and the phrase captures how abruptly wider economic relationships enter the family's daily life.

Michael initially contemplates selling land.

He cannot bring himself to do it.

A second solution emerges through Luke.

A prosperous kinsman engaged in trade can employ the young man. Luke may earn money, help recover the family's financial position and eventually return to inherit an estate that has remained intact.

Michael explains the decision to Isabel:

"Our Luke shall leave us, Isabel; the land

Shall not go from us" (ll. 244–45).

The two clauses contain the entire tragedy.

Luke must leave.

The land must remain.

Michael hopes that these two movements can preserve the same future.

His decision should not be simplified into an opposition between paternal love and greed. Nothing in the poem suggests that Michael values land more than his son in an ordinary acquisitive sense.

He values the land partly because of Luke.

The estate is the material future that he hopes to leave him.

Michael's plan becomes tragic because something important is missing from its economic logic. The property can remain physically in place while Luke leaves, but inheritance is not made from property alone.

For years Luke has been learning how to inhabit the estate.

His identity as Michael's successor has developed through proximity.

He has worked beside his father.

He has known the household.

He has learned the surrounding landscape.

His removal changes the conditions under which those habits can continue to develop.

The problem is not simply geographical distance. It is the interruption of practice.

Wordsworth does not immediately present the plan as a failure. Luke initially behaves well. Favourable reports and affectionate letters reach his parents.

Only later does the pattern change.

Luke begins to neglect his responsibilities. He falls into disgrace and eventually disappears overseas.

The treatment of this transformation is strikingly brief.

Peter Manning's work on Luke and the silences of the poem remains important here. Wordsworth gives the reader detailed knowledge of Michael's rural existence but very little information about Luke's life after departure.

We do not know much about his new companions.

We do not know the stages of his moral decline.

We do not see the city with anything like the detail with which we see Michael's valley.

The city becomes partly a narrative absence.

This should caution against the easy conclusion that "Michael" proves urban life to be corrupt and rural life to be pure.

Wordsworth asserts Luke's failure.

He does not fully explain it.

What the poem does show more clearly is that the moral environment through which Luke was formed has been removed.

Michael believes that his son's character can survive separation.

The poem discovers that such confidence may be misplaced.

Moral education, like rural knowledge, is not always portable.

5. Michael as Father and Household Head

Michael's authority within the poem deserves careful treatment.

He is unquestionably the patriarch of the household. He is father, husband, landholder and the person through whom property is expected to pass to Luke.

Yet Wordsworth rarely represents that authority as domination.

Michael's standing comes from work, experience and responsibility.

He provides.

He cares.

He teaches through example.

He accepts obligations.

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His strength is repeatedly associated with endurance rather than command.

The relationship with Luke develops through companionship. Michael expects obedience, but paternal authority is not represented merely as power over the son. His deepest hope is that Luke will continue the life he has built.

This gives his authority a future orientation.

He works not merely for himself but for succession.

Yet the poem also exposes the limits of paternal power.

Michael can guide Luke while Luke remains beside him.

He cannot govern the son's conduct at a distance.

He can create a promise.

He cannot force the future to honour it.

He can preserve land temporarily.

He cannot guarantee that Luke will eventually inherit it.

These limits make Michael's tragedy more complex than simple victimhood.

He acts.

He chooses.

His choices have consequences.

At the same time, circumstances restrict the available choices so severely that no option offers security.

Isabel's presence also complicates the household structure. Michael consults her when the crisis emerges. Her distress over Luke's departure is not treated as irrational obstruction. She understands that the proposed solution carries emotional costs.

The poem therefore contains two different anxieties.

Michael fears losing the land.

Isabel fears losing the son.

Neither fear is unfounded.

The tragedy proves both correct.

6. The Sheepfold and the Broken Covenant

The unfinished sheepfold concentrates the central concerns of the poem into a single object.

At first it has an ordinary agricultural purpose.

Michael's flock needs it.

He has gathered the stones because the work is necessary.

The symbolic significance comes later.

On the evening before Luke's departure, Michael takes his son to the site and speaks to him at length. The moment is unusual because much of what Luke has previously learned from his father has not needed formal explanation.

They have lived together.

They have worked together.

Now that they are about to separate, Michael turns experience into words.

He recounts family history and speaks about obligation, labour and inheritance.

The sheepfold becomes a "covenant" between father and son.

Michael asks Luke to lay the first stone.

Luke bends down and does so.

The act is simple.

Its meaning depends upon a future.

Michael imagines completing the fold while Luke is away. The structure will preserve the son's connection to home, and Luke will eventually return to the land whose continuity has been saved for him.

The reader already knows that this future will not be realised.

The first stone therefore carries both hope and loss.

This is why the later image of Michael returning to the sheepfold is so powerful. After Luke's disgrace, he is sometimes seen at the site without lifting a single stone.

Wordsworth does not need to describe his grief at length.

The absence of labour expresses it.

Michael has been defined through activity. His inability to continue working at this particular place reveals the emotional transformation of the object.

The sheepfold still has a practical function.

Its practical function is no longer enough to determine its meaning.

Michael eventually works on it again from time to time.

He never finishes it.

Its incompleteness is more significant than complete abandonment would have been.

Michael continues to return to the relationship represented by the structure, but he cannot bring that relationship to completion.

The fold therefore preserves interrupted continuity.

Calling it simply a "symbol of broken hope" is not incorrect, but it is incomplete.

The sheepfold has passed through several meanings.

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It is agricultural work.
It becomes family promise.
It becomes a place of mourning.
It survives as historical trace.
The stones themselves do not change.
Their place in human life does.

7. Pastoral and Historical Change

Wordsworth deliberately subtitles "Michael" "A Pastoral Poem."

The description invites comparison with a long literary tradition in which shepherds and rural settings acquire representative significance. Yet Wordsworth gives the shepherd's life an unusual material density.

Michael works.
He worries about debt.
He owns land.
His family performs domestic production.
His son's future depends upon employment.
The pastoral world is therefore never free from economic realities.

Paul Alpers's account of pastoral is valuable because it allows the mode to be understood through the representative position of shepherds rather than through scenery alone. "Michael" belongs to pastoral, but Wordsworth revises what the shepherd can represent.

Mark Jones's analysis of the poem's "double economics" similarly helps explain why it should not be treated either as straightforward rural realism or as pure idealisation.

Wordsworth certainly shapes Michael's household.
Michael is exceptionally strong.
The family is exceptionally industrious.
Their domestic life possesses an unusual degree of coherence.
The poem is not a neutral sociological record.
Yet the idealisation is not protected from disruption.
Wordsworth subjects it to pressure.
Debt enters.
Luke leaves.
The succession fails.
The property is eventually sold.
Pastoral becomes capable of registering historical change.

Fiona Stafford has shown the importance of resisting the old assumption that Wordsworth's pastoral represents withdrawal from public life. "Michael" focuses on one household, but the ending deliberately widens the frame.

After Michael and Isabel die, the estate passes into a stranger's hand.
The cottage disappears.
A plough crosses the place where it stood.
"Great changes" have occurred throughout the neighbourhood.
The individual tragedy becomes evidence of something broader.

Wordsworth's letter to Fox strengthens this historical dimension by referring to the disappearance of the small independent landholders he admired.

The poem nevertheless remains literature rather than social history.
It does not provide a statistical account of agrarian transformation.
It gives that transformation emotional and material form.
History appears through a disappearing cottage and unfinished stones.
That method explains much of the poem's durability.
Large processes become visible through small losses.

8. Moral Economy and the Failure of Continuity

The concept of moral economy brings the poem's apparently separate concerns into relation.

Michael's land possesses an economic value.
It also possesses a familial value.
His labour produces livelihood.
It also produces identity.
Luke is expected to inherit property.
He is also expected to inherit responsibility.
These dimensions coexist successfully while the family remains together.
The financial crisis separates them.
The market recognises the land as something that can be sold.
Michael experiences it as something that ought to be passed on.

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Both understandings are economically intelligible, but they are not morally equivalent for him.

His attempt to preserve the estate through Luke's departure is an effort to satisfy both systems of value.

The land will remain.

Money will be earned elsewhere.

The son will return.

The family will continue.

Everything depends on the last two expectations.

When Luke does not return, the financial strategy loses its moral purpose.

This is the distinctive tragedy of "Michael."

The estate has never been valuable merely because Michael wants to own it.

Its value lies partly in transmission.

Once transmission becomes impossible, ownership itself changes meaning.

Michael continues working after Luke's disgrace. He remains attached to the land. Yet the future towards which decades of labour had been directed has disappeared.

The moral economy of the household has therefore failed not because its values were meaningless, but because the material and social conditions necessary to reproduce them have broken apart.

This is an important distinction.

Wordsworth does not simply say that traditional values are superior to modern ones.

He shows how values depend upon structures.

Affection requires relationships.

Knowledge requires practice.

Inheritance requires continuity.

Memory requires something capable of carrying it.

The fate of the sheepfold reveals what happens when those structures no longer coincide.

9. Memory after Loss

The final lines return the reader to the question posed at the beginning.

After Michael dies, Isabel survives only briefly. The estate is sold and passes into "a stranger's hand" (ll. 476–77).

Michael's deepest fear becomes reality.

The property he refused to sell does not remain within the family.

Luke never receives it.

The cottage disappears.

The household is gone.

The ending might therefore seem to offer complete defeat.

Wordsworth does not quite allow that.

The old oak remains.

The unfinished sheepfold remains.

Their survival is modest and ambiguous.

They do not restore anything.

The land is not returned.

The son does not come home.

The household is not rebuilt.

What remains is evidence.

Evidence, however, does not interpret itself.

The traveller who sees the heap of stones at the beginning of the poem does not know its meaning.

The narrator must tell the story.

Poetry therefore assumes a function after material inheritance has failed.

It cannot preserve Michael's estate for Luke.

It can preserve the knowledge that Michael existed and explain why those unfinished stones matter.

This is one of Wordsworth's deepest achievements in the poem.

Memory becomes another form of inheritance, but it is not presented as an adequate substitute for the original inheritance.

The distinction should be preserved.

A poem is not land.

Narration is not family continuity.

Remembering a loss does not reverse it.

Wordsworth's achievement lies precisely in refusing such easy consolation.

The sheepfold remains unfinished.

The reader learns why.

10. Conclusion

"Michael" is much more than a sentimental account of an old shepherd and his unfortunate son. Wordsworth places a rural household within a network of land, labour, property, family affection, financial obligation and historical change.

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The idea of moral economy helps explain how these elements remain connected.

For Michael, land possesses a market price, but its significance is not exhausted by that price. It has been inherited, worked and prepared for transmission. His identity as owner cannot be separated from his sense of responsibility towards both past and future generations.

Labour carries the same complexity. It sustains the household materially, yet it also produces knowledge, discipline and intimacy. Luke becomes a possible heir through participation long before he could inherit legally.

The financial crisis exposes the fragility of this arrangement.

Michael's decision to send Luke away is neither merely foolish nor selfish. It arises from his attempt to preserve two things that have always appeared inseparable to him: his son and his land.

Circumstances force them apart.

The land remains temporarily because Luke leaves.

The intended heir is protected economically at the cost of separation from the environment through which his relationship to the inheritance has been formed.

Luke's eventual failure destroys the anticipated succession.

The unfinished sheepfold gives the loss its most enduring form.

It begins as necessary farm work.

It becomes a covenant.

It survives as a memorial.

Its incompletion registers the failure of the future Michael had imagined.

Yet Wordsworth does not end with absolute disappearance.

The stones survive.

Their survival alone, however, is insufficient. They require narration before their history becomes visible.

The poem performs that act of narration.

"Michael" therefore preserves something that property could not preserve: an understanding of the relationships through which the lost property acquired meaning.

Wordsworth's pastoral vision is neither purely nostalgic nor simply anti-modern. The rural household he represents is admirable but vulnerable. Its values depend upon material conditions and human relationships that cannot be guaranteed indefinitely.

The poem's enduring power lies in its recognition of this vulnerability.

Land may survive while a family disappears.

Objects may remain while their meanings are forgotten.

Property may be inherited without the knowledge required to inhabit it.

Memory itself may depend upon somebody stopping beside an ordinary heap of stones and asking what happened there.

Through Michael's story, Wordsworth makes that act of attention possible.

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