

# Artistic Analysis on Tintern Abbey

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As one of the monasteries standing in English history for thousands of years, Tintern Abbey has great research value in religious history, architectural aesthetics, literature, and art. This paper selects the novels and the works of artists such as Wordsworth, Turner to explain that Tintern Abbey symbolizes the passing of the British rural community, the game between kingship and religious power, the natural representation in industrial civilization, and the disappointment of returning to the middle ages.

*Keywords:* Tintern Abbey, William Wordsworth, British rural community

## Medieval Community

As one of the important buildings of the Cistercian society, Tintern Abbey emphasizes poverty, simplicity, and seclusion. The founder of the Cistercian Order was Saint Robert of Molesme (1028-1111) dissatisfied with the monks' laziness under the increasing wealth. In 1098, he led 21 monks to a marshy wasteland near Dijon to establish a new monastery, strictly abided by the rules of St. Benedict.

In the 11th century, the Norman invasion of Wales made the Cistercian society quickly spread to Wales. Unlike the Benedictine church, Cistercian society visited the remote and lonely mountains and marshes to seek a simple and natural life, which was deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. Tintern Abbey has become one of the richest churches in Wales. In *Abbeys and Priorities of Medieval Walls*, Tintern Abbey by 1291 had more than 3,000 acres of arable land and more than 3,000 sheep. The annual income of the monastery exceeded 145 pounds, and only 36 pounds were used for spiritualities, but also "have quite objective real estate in Gloucestershire across Wye River" (Burton & Stober, 2016, p. 206).

In medieval rural society, churches were important places for villagers' religious beliefs and spiritual and cultural entertainment, as well as the spiritual symbol of the village and the symbol of community identity. When the Black Death swept across the European continent in the 14th century, the prosperity of Tintern Abbey was gradually reduced under the attack of the disease. In the battle against death, the number of monks who often contacted patients was lost. Welsh poet Jean Geuthin wrote about a doctor: "We see death like black smoke, this disaster cut off young lives, rootless ghosts have cruel and ugly faces" (Christie, 2008, p. 4).

The good times did not last long. Tintern Abbey encountered a financial crisis and a national ban. In 1535, Henry VIII ordered the dismissal of monasteries whose annual income was less than 200 pounds. Tintern Abbey cannot escape this disaster. "The property belongs to the king" and is used for the construction of the

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national army. Once monks scattered and left, “Above Lancot, in a fequefter’d dell, Where Monks in former days were wont to dwell, Enclosed with woods and hills on every fide, Stand Tintern Abbey, spoil’d of all her pride” (Davis, 1803, p. 15).

Until the 18th century, under the influence of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic War, in the Victorian era of Britain, exploring inaccessible places became a graduation tourism trend favored by aristocratic youth, and tourism along the Wye River gradually developed. The Reverend William Gilpin published his *Observations on the River Wye* and highly praised the beauty of Tintern Abbey. Since then, the number of tourists visiting Tintern Abbey has gradually increased, especially after Wordsworth’s *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798* was published, which made tourists and scholars come in droves, and the art of poetry and paintings emerge endlessly. Tintern Abbey gradually came into people’s view and became a famous tourist attraction.

### **The Game Between Kingship and Religious Power**

As a religious building, the development of Tintern Abbey has experienced the process of the middle ages, reflecting the separation of royal power and religious power. On the one hand, “the power of the king was limited by various social communities in the Kingdom, including the clergy whose power exceeded the Kingdom boundary” (Dickinson, 1979, p. 6). Although the church recognizes the authority of the pope in terms of religious secularity, it has been increasingly linked with the king’s government in terms of organizational structure (Liu, 1998, p. 14). This laid the foundation for Henry VIII’s religious reform.

Europe has believed in the principle of divine monarchy since ancient times. In this way, the right to appoint the king and related secular affairs are all firmly in the hands of the church. Because the church has been corrupt for years, most of the British tax revenue has been embezzled and squandered by the church. The anti Catholic sentiment of the masses was rising day by day. Many more radical ideas emerged from the squires and the bourgeoisie. Objectively, it accelerated the progress of British religious reform. At the same time, people’s thinking way has changed. They do not simply believe in God, but doubt it. A physician at that time said, “he told me that his students are not afraid of God; similarly, they believe that God does not exist. There is no heaven or hell” (Masters, 2008, p. 233).

For these reasons, in 1534, Congress passed a bill announcing the dissolution of the monastery with an annual income of less than 200 pounds, and the original and real estate were owned by the royal family. In 1537 to 1540, Henry VIII began to dissolve the monastery with an annual income of more than 200 pounds. All the wealth of the closed monastery became the property of the king. Tintern Abbey was also in this catastrophe. The monks finally realized that this was a power transformation between the Pope and the king. The last bishop of Tintern Abbey said with great regret, “this is not only about power and control, but also not economy. It is just that people no longer believe in God” (Masters, 2008, p. 233).

As Barbara Winchester’s book *Tudor Family Portrait* puts forward,

The ruins established or destroyed by the Tudor Dynasty are still left in the countryside, and the distant echo of the revolution calls us to travel to the middle ages...The exquisite Tintern Abbey evoke the romantic memories of those lost years, which is also a signal of the decline of papal rights. (Winchester, 1955, p. 34)

Since then, the turbulent stage of Tintern Abbey ended and gradually declined. It was the decline of Catholicism in Britain. It also witnessed the transformation of religious power and kingship, and British society opened a new chapter.

### Tintern Abbey in “Nature”

Wordsworth and Joseph Mallord William Turner are the most popular people in describing Tintern Abbey. The view of “nature” embodied in their works is exactly similar to Rousseau’s view in the romantic period.

Rousseau specifically mentioned in *Émile, ou De l'éducation* that the evolution of “civilization” has desecrated the kind and honest nature of human beings, resulting in the general degradation of conscience and moral fashion (Wen, 2010, p. 110). Therefore, his thought of the opposition between “nature” and “civilization” agrees with romanticism.

Wordsworth’s *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* describes the scenery:

These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts/Which at this season, with their unripe fruits/Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves/Mid groves and copses. Once again I see/These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines/Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms/Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke/Sent up, in silence, from among the trees! (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, 2007, p. 98)

In this vibrant scene, John R. Nabholz put forward in *The Integrity of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”*: “Tintern Abbey is a kind of mood and emotion” (Nabholz, 1974, p. 228). In its view, the existence of Tintern Abbey has nothing to do with mood. Tintern Abbey in poetry is an externalized object of emotional sustenance and expression, which is the emotion triggered by seeing things. “Tintern Abbey is part of the development process of poetry. It is based on nature, but its inner cognition is gradually higher than nature” (Nabholz, 1974, p. 229).

In addition to Wordsworth’s two visits to the abbey, J. M. William Turner visited the abbey in 1792 and 1789. At that time, “The Grand Tour” and “Picturesque” were popular in Europe. Geological landscape painting is highly respected. Turner was only 17 years old at that time. Because of his talent, he entered the Royal Academy of Fine Arts to study painting. During his first visit to Wye River, he created a series of geological landscape watercolors *Tintern Abbey From the River Wye* with fresh watercolor brushwork. The standard of “Picturesque” lies in “irregular ups and downs and changing forms, colors, light, and lines” (R. L. Liu & M. Y. Liu, 1985, p. 11). In the film *Mr. Turner*, he said “You should draw your impression”. He advocated recording the intuitive feeling brought by the real nature he saw on the drawing paper.

During the Picturesque Movement, a large number of painters described Tintern Abbey. They have shown the natural beauty of Tintern Abbey from various angles. Samuel Ireland’s painting *Picturesque Views on the River Wye* was published in 1797. When he visited the river Wye, he vigorously praised the silence of Tintern Abbey, which inspired people’s awe and piety, and made people think about time and cruelty” (Bate, 2002, p. 144). In 1799, Edward Dayes, a British watercolor painter and sculptor, published 16 prints of *Views on the River Wye* by intaglio etching, mainly depicting the desolation of Tintern Abbey ferry and the nearby rural scenery, in order to show his respect for historical relics. The Buck Brothers showed the spire window in the east of the church in their works. Nicholas depicted the gate of Tintern Abbey in his watercolor painting in 1822, which showed its once powerful power and the scope of the church (Williams, 1796, p. 287). Around 1830, Henry Gastineau carved the abbey in steel. In *Tintern, Monmouthshire*, one painting shows the water transportation of the Wye River, while the other is the road to Chepstow.

In Deborah Kennedy’s *Wordsworth, Turner, and the Power of Tintern Abbey*, “The ruins of Tintern Abbey are not lifeless stones, but buildings that have experienced the vicissitudes of time, witnessed history, and are also places for visitors to meditate” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 79). Tintern Abbey in the poem places the

poet's feelings and state. They recall and miss the loss of glory, and are confused and disappointed about the future life.

### **Gothic Ruins of “The Middle Ages”**

Poets, painters, and artists in the romantic period emphasized the liberation and freedom of human nature, escapism, and longing for nature, which were also reflected in architecture. As a result, the middle ages or foreign countries became the “dream world” of creators. The monasteries and castle ruins left over a hundred years ago have become the origin of dreams. It can be said that “ruins symbolize the national history of Britain in different ways: they tell about the change of dynasties, the rights of the church, the cruelty of war and the unpredictable changes of life” (Feng, 2016, p. 106). The French Revolution, which broke out in 1789, had a great impact on British society, making people clearly aware of the oppression of capitalism in real society and the conflict between old and new ideas. Therefore, some romantics have the idea of being extremely disappointed in reality, escaping from reality, paying attention to their hearts, and eager to return to the past. By subverting reality and advocating emotion, the yearning for Gothic ruins was born. Therefore, “the vigorous exaggeration of the ancient castle is a metaphor and exploration of the evil of social existence” (Williams, 1796, p. 60).

Coleridge describes the scene in *The Tour of Wye River* (1781) displayed by a poor disabled woman: “She seems to tell us about her unfortunate life experience; and she shows us her terrible residence” (Brinkley, 1985, p. 126). In *View on the Wye*, a painting created in 1815, although the painter Simon did not visit Tintern Abbey, he visited the nearby cast iron processing plant. He observed that “the workers seem to be sick” and he also found that “their salaries are only a little higher than those of ordinary farm workers”.

As a surviving Gothic church, the sad mood it represents is also an important part of Gothic style: Its doors are Gothic style. Gothic churches often have magnificent appearance and strange and magical interior decoration. The blurred light transmitted by the towering spires and magnificent stained glass flower windows makes people feel awe, exaltation, mystery, and transcendence when entering them, as if they are particularly close to God. Therefore, it is easy for artists to stimulate their emotions and look for romantic inspiration.

In Thomas Whately *Observations on Modern Gardening*, it combines the Gothic Tintern Abbey with the natural landscape. Gothic prayer altars and debris have been tempered by time and wind and rain. Some damaged parts began to collapse. All things are doomed. All things awaken our understanding of prayer, loneliness, and destruction (Whately, 1801, p. 73).

In Carl Gustav's paintings *Gothic Ruins at Night* and *Gothic Church Ruins in the Moonlight*, they clearly show the sharp rib vault of Gothic architecture. Although it is in ruins, the upward vault still gives people a feeling of hope to break away from the shackles of the earth and continue to rise. This is also in line with the believers' expectation of ascension and atonement. In addition, the vine covered buildings under the moonlight also reflects the style of focusing on self emotion under decadent romanticism.

### **Conclusion**

After centuries of disputes, the rise and fall of Tintern Abbey symbolizes the lost glory of Britain and the dissolution of the rural community. In the Romantic period, artists placed the dissatisfaction, melancholy, and depression of the industrial revolution in Tintern Abbey, which represents nature. Facing Tintern Abbey, they expected to return to the “carefree” medieval pastoral life. As Thomas McFarland said, “Our perception of

external forces and divine light comes from our imitation of incomplete, debris and ruins” (Mcfarland, 1981, p. 15). Tintern Abbey has left infinite disappointment for future generations.

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