

William Wordsworth – Timeline and Biography

Time-line

1770 Wordsworth is born in the Lake District.

1778 Wordsworth's mother dies.

1779 Wordsworth is sent away to boarding school in Hawkshead.

1783 His father dies.

1787 Wordsworth attends St. John's College, Cambridge, where he is an indifferent student.

1791 Graduates from Cambridge.

1791 Travels to France, where he meets Annette Vallon with whom he has a daughter, Caroline.

1792 Returns to England

1795 Wordsworth comes into an inheritance of nine hundred pounds sterling. If we consider average earnings in 1795, that amount would be comparable to someone inheriting £872,000, or slightly over one million euro. Wordsworth's friend hoped that, by leaving him this money, he would encourage Wordsworth to spend his time writing poetry, rather than trying to earn a living.

1795 Wordsworth meets Coleridge, and they strike up a friendship.

1797 Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy move to Alfoxden House, close to Coleridge's home.

1798 Coleridge, William and Dorothy Wordsworth travel to Germany. Wordsworth is unhappy.

1798 *Lyrical Ballads* – a collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge - is published.

1799 The Wordsworths return to England, and settle in Grasmere, in a house called Dove Cottage.

1802 The war between England and France ends, and Wordsworth goes to France to meet his daughter Caroline.

1802 Wordsworth marries Mary Hutchinson. They have been friends since childhood. Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, lives with the couple.

1803 The first of Wordsworth's five children by his wife Mary is born.

1843 Wordsworth is named Poet Laureate. He is reluctant to accept the honour, claiming he is too old, but the Prime Minister persuades him. Wordsworth becomes the only Poet Laureate to write no official poetry.

1850 Wordsworth dies of pleurisy. A few months after his death, his wife publishes *The Prelude*.

It is easy to outline the bare facts of Wordsworth's life, but we should be more concerned with those aspects of his life and work which are relevant to the poems on the Leaving Cert course than we should be with the dates and places which can be found in any biography.

When we think of Wordsworth, therefore, we should think of the poet; and when we think of the events of his life, we should only do so in so far as they shaped his poetic sensibilities. There are a few areas of his life on which we should concentrate, when we look at what made him a poet whose work was not only greatly respected in his own lifetime, but has continued to be revered and appreciated by generations of readers.

Wordsworth's childhood was a happy one in many ways. He was born and raised in a beautiful part of England – the Lake District – and enjoyed great freedom when it came to roaming about the countryside as a young boy. This time spent enjoying nature was to play a large part in the formation of the poet's mind, and it is something we will deal with in more detail when we look at individual poems. He was also fortunate to have siblings who, to varying degrees, shared his poetic interests. However, the circumstances of his youth were not without their sorrows. He lost both parents at a relatively young age, and was raised by conscientious but largely unsympathetic relations. Wordsworth was an anxious youngster in many ways. His mother was concerned for him because of the 'violence' of his nature, and he was, by all accounts, a temperamental youth. He was particularly resentful of authority, and on one occasion he destroyed a picture of his aunt by striking it with a whip. His was a strong and passionate nature, which he was fortunate enough to be able to harness in the pursuit of poetry later in his life.

As a student at St. John's College, Cambridge, Wordsworth hardly excelled. He felt remote from his peers, and said of his time there:

I was the Dreamer, they the Dream; I roamed
Delighted with the motley spectacle:

Gowns grave, or gaudy, doctors, students, streets,
Courts, cloisters, flocks of churches, gateways, towers:
Migration strange for a stripling of the hills,
A northern villager.

It was while he was at Cambridge that the French Revolution began – an event which was to have a great influence on the budding poet. In 1791, shortly after the Revolution had begun, Wordsworth travelled to France with a friend from Cambridge, Robert Jones. The changes being wrought in Revolutionary France appealed to all that was romantic in Wordsworth's nature. He rejoiced in the freedom of the people and he enthusiastically joined in the celebrations of liberty in the villages and towns the friends visited. Everywhere they went, the roads were hung with garlands and the people danced on village greens long into the night. It is hardly surprising that such joy should have had a profound effect on the young man. From this time on, Wordsworth concerned himself not simply with personal interests, but with the welfare of all mankind.

While in France, Wordsworth met a young woman called Annette Vallon, with whom he had a love affair. They did not marry, but she bore him a daughter.

Unfortunately, the hopes Wordsworth had of the French Revolution were not to be fulfilled. He left France in 1792, and Robespierre's Reign of Terror began shortly afterwards. The guillotine was introduced, and ordinary men and women, as well as aristocrats, were executed for speaking out against the Revolution or its leaders. At the same time, England declared war on France, and Wordsworth's loyalties were torn. It seemed that his faith in human nature had been premature, and the poet was plunged into scepticism.

On returning to England, Wordsworth found himself facing the disapproval of his relations. They felt that it was time for the young man to apply himself to a profession and earn a good living. Fortunately for Wordsworth, the need to embark on a career in Law, or the Church was forestalled by a fortuitous legacy. A friend of his, Raisley Calvert, died, leaving the poet a legacy of nine hundred pounds. The money enabled Wordsworth to set up home with Dorothy in Somerset, close to where Coleridge lived. From this time on, Wordsworth had no serious worries about money.

Both Coleridge and Dorothy were very influential in Wordsworth's life and work. The three of them travelled together to Germany in 1797. The trip was not entirely successful in that Coleridge had sufficient funds to travel widely, but Wordsworth, who had to support his

sister as well as himself, did not. Wordsworth was not happy in Germany, and it was there that he wrote four of the five 'Lucy' poems. Coleridge and Wordsworth worked together, and in 1798, the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published.

In 1799, Wordsworth and Dorothy moved to Grasmere, in the Lake District. and it was here that Wordsworth lived for the rest of his life.

In 1802, the Peace of Amiens allowed Wordsworth to return to France and met his daughter for the first and only time. The occasion of their meeting is captured in 'It is a beautiful evening, calm and free'.

On returning to England, Wordsworth married his wife Mary and had five children with her. Mary knew of his relationship with Annette Vallon and of the child, Caroline. Wordsworth and Mary had five children together, though a son and a daughter died in 1812. In 1813, Wordsworth was appointed Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland, a position which carried with it a yearly income of four hundred pounds.

Wordsworth and Coleridge remained friends, although their relationship was strained for a time due to Coleridge's opium addiction. Dorothy continued to live with Wordsworth and Mary, and they took care of her when, after a serious illness in 1829, she became an invalid.

Fame and a modest fortune were Wordsworth's in his later years. He was awarded honorary Doctorates from Durham and Oxford universities, and was made Poet Laureate in 1843. However, with the death of his daughter Dora in 1847, Wordsworth's writing ceased completely. He remains the only Poet Laureate to have written no official poetry during his time in office.

Wordsworth died in 1850, and was buried in his beloved Grasmere. His widow, Mary, published *The Prelude* shortly after his death. It was not particularly well-received at the time, but is now recognised as one of the great masterpieces of poetry.

It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free;
The holy time is quiet as a nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea:
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder – everlastingly.

Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year,
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

Background to the poem

In 1802 Wordsworth returned at last to France to meet his daughter, Caroline, for the first time. They walked together on the beach in Calais, and that meeting was the inspiration for this poem.

Analysis

The poem opens with a description of the evening. It is a peaceful, calm, beautiful time, as the father and daughter watch the sun setting over the sea. Wordsworth always loved such serene times, as they allowed him to reflect on the spiritual world and appreciate the beauty of nature. He feels 'free' because he can, in this place and at this time, forget the concerns of the wider world, and lose himself in the moment. He feels that this is a 'holy' time, and that he should spend it in reverent thought. Wordsworth, though not an atheist, was not religious in the strict sense of the word. He felt that nature offered us a chance to see something of the divine, or the 'Presence' which exists beyond our understanding. This

sonnet is full of religious references which can be taken as a reflection of the poet's spiritual relationship with nature.

The soft 's' sounds and the assonance in these opening lines: 'holy', 'adoration' and 'broods' add to the mood of reverential silence and peace. Suddenly, there is a shift as the poet tells us to 'Listen!' This surprising exclamation is followed by a description of the waves which are 'like thunder'. The silence is broken, and the noise makes Wordsworth think that the 'mighty Being' is awake. Is it God, or nature, or a combination of the two? We are not told. It is safe to assume that Wordsworth means the force which drives everything, regardless of its name. It may be God to some people, but that is not important here.

In the sestet, the poet addresses his daughter affectionately, 'Dear Child!'. He repeats the word 'dear', showing his love for the little girl. She is not moved to spiritual thought by the scene, but Wordsworth does not love her any the less for this. She is untouched by 'solemn thought', which is hardly surprising, given that she is nine years of age. However, her response is no 'less divine'. Children are close to God, or whatever 'mighty Being' exists, simply because of their innocence.

From *The Prelude* [lines 452-489] Skating

And in the frosty season, when the sun
Was set, and visible for many a mile
The cottage windows blazed through twilight gloom,
I heeded not their summons: happy time
It was indeed for all of us – for me
It was a time of rapture! Clear and loud
The village clock tolled six, - I wheeled about
Proud and exulting like an untired horse
That cares not for his home. All shod with steel,
We hissed along the polished ice in games
Confederate, imitative of the chase
And woodland pleasures, - the resounding horn,
The pack loud chiming, and the hunted hare.
So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
And not a voice was idle; with the din,
Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;
The leafless trees and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron; while the distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy, not unnoticed, while the stars,
Eastward were sparkling clear, and in the west
The orange sky of evening died away.
Not seldom from the uproar I retired
Into a silent bay, or sportively
Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng,
To cut across the reflex of a star
That fled, and, flying still before me, gleamed,
Upon the glassy plain; and oftentimes,
When we had given our bodies to the wind,
And all the shadowy banks on either side
Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still
The rapid line of motion, then at once
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,
Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs

Wheeled by me - even as if the earth had rolled
With visible motion her diurnal round!
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.

The Prelude, 1799; Book I, ls 452-489

Background to the poem

This poem, and 'The Stolen Boat' are taken from the much longer work, 'The Prelude'. In 'The Prelude', Wordsworth explores the events in his life from childhood to adulthood, and looks at the way in which they made him the man he became.

Analysis

The poem opens with a description of a perfect winter wonderland. It is 'the frosty season' and the sun has set. The only lights are those of the cottage windows, shining through 'the twilight gloom'. They may call to some, but Wordsworth ignores their summons. This is a time of joy for the young boy and his friends, but there is a sense that Wordsworth somehow appreciates it even more than his companions. '- for me / It was a time of rapture!' The run-on lines add to this sense of excitement and freedom that the poet felt during this 'happy time'.

Wordsworth likens himself to a horse in the eighth line, a comparison reinforced by his description of the skaters as being 'shod with steel'. The repeated 's' sounds in the line 'We hissed along the polished ice' bring the scene to life for us. The children are also compared to a pack of hounds chasing a hare. The verbs used in this section of the poem are very dynamic, 'wheeled', 'hissed' and 'flew', and their use, as well as the comparison between the poet and an 'untired horse' add to the sense of energy and vigour in the poem. It is easy to imagine the children's pleasure and excitement as they skate about in the dark, and Wordsworth's effective use of language allows us to share in the skaters' delight and excitement.

As the children skate on, they shout with glee. 'So through the darkness and the cold we flew, / And not a voice was idle.' The noise echoes off the surrounding cliffs, and the 'precipices rang aloud'. Wordsworth's depiction of the sounds in this poem is wonderful. The simile describing the echoes is particularly striking. The landscape 'Tinkled like iron' as the children played. The use of the word 'tinkle' suggests Christmas bells, perhaps, or any other cheerful, happy sound.

The echoes which come back from the distant hills are sad and 'alien'. The 'melancholy' may seem out of place when describing children's games, but the Romantic poets believed that sad music was the most beautiful. The mention of 'melancholy' also lends the poem an air of mystery, and perhaps they foreshadow the emotions of the adult poet as he thinks back to those times which he cannot revisit. Time passes, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Wordsworth leaves his friends and finds a quiet spot away from the 'tumultuous throng' where he can skate around in peace. It is significant that Wordsworth feels the need to leave his companions. He retires to a 'silent bay' and spends time alone. This emphasis on solitude and isolation, and on the need for peace and time to allow the poet to contemplate the natural world is a feature of Romantic poetry. The poet is not like the other children; already he has a keener appreciation of the natural world.

The description of the children as having 'given our bodies to the wind' is a powerful one. They are out of control, and have surrendered themselves to the speed and the exhilaration of skating. When he takes a break, the dizzy youngster feels an awareness of the earth turning on her 'diurnal round'.

The mood of the poem changes in the last lines. After all the excitement of the skating, Wordsworth takes a moment to stand and watch the beauty of the 'shadowy banks on either side'. He feels as if the earth is spinning because he has been whirling around on his skates, but there is also a hint here that time passes and that, although the boy might not be aware of it, life is transient. As he stands there, he experiences a feeling of utmost tranquillity. 'I stood and watched / Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.'

From *The Prelude* [lines 452-489] Skating

One summer evening (led by her) I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon's utmost boundary; far above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my bark,-
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain

Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

Analysis

Like 'Skating', this poem is about a moment in Wordsworth's young life when he was moved by the beauty and splendour of the natural world. These moments of heightened awareness were what the poet later referred to as 'spots of time'. They made him aware of his sensitivity and his poetic feeling. This love of nature and realisation that even as a child, he had poetic sensibilities, reminds me of Kavanagh when, in 'A Christmas Childhood', he refers to himself as a 'child poet' who, as a six year old boy, saw beauty in nature that others did not see.

The poem tells of a time in the poet's life when, while walking alone by a lake, he comes upon a boat tied to a tree. Impulsively, he unties it and, without delay, heads off across the lake. He refers to his joy as a 'troubled pleasure' because he knows that the boat is not his and that he will be in trouble if he is caught. He feels guilty for taking the boat without permission.

The evening is beautiful, and Wordsworth is soon swept up in its loveliness. There is a sense of tranquillity as he rows across the lake, hearing the sound of the oars echoing off the mountain. The ripples caused by the oars shimmer in the moonlight and the boat glides through the water 'like a swan'.

The poet enjoys the act of rowing, and is proud of his ability to steer the boat in a straight line. He fixes his eye on a particular point of a 'craggy ridge' in order to keep himself straight. The scene is one of near perfection as the boy move across the lake. The stars have begun to appear in the sky, and the only sound is of the oars dipping into the water.

However, this tranquillity does not last. As the poet rows on, a huge mountain peak appears behind the crag. The boy is terrified of this 'grim shape'. It seems to loom above him in a menacing fashion, and appears to grow larger and larger. It blots out the stars and almost

seems to move towards him. 'with a purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing / Strode after me.'

Wordsworth turns and heads for the shore, rowing with trembling hands. He leaves the boat where he found it and returns home, in 'grave / And serious mood.' His fear does not vanish, however. He cannot shake off the memory of his fear, and it stays with him for 'many days', troubling him. He has disturbing visions of nature now, instead of the usual images of trees and green fields. He sees 'huge and mighty forms' and he sleeps badly.

The poem presents nature as a mentor who teaches the boy that stealing is wrong. Nature is like a foster parent of sorts. It can teach through 'beauty and by fear'. Its beauty can bring him great pleasure, but if he transgresses, it will reprimand him. It is worth noting that it was nature in the first place which led the boy to the boat. Was this in order to place temptation in his way, and thus teach him a lesson?

As in 'Skating', it is when the poet is alone that these insights occur to him. Solitude, in Wordsworth's poetry, is associated with contemplation and the ability to gain insights into the natural world and man's place in it.

Tintern Abbey

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
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!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

These beauteous forms
Through a long absence, have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,

His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on, -
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

If this

Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft,
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart -
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!
And now, with gleams of half-extinguish'd thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. And so I dare to hope
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first
I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides

Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led; more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world

Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Nor, perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! And this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain winds be free
To blow against thee: and in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,

Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance,
If I should be, where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence, wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came,
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love - oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake.

COMPOSED A FEW MILES ABOVE TINTERN ABBEY, ON REVISITING THE BANKS OF
THE WYE DURING A TOUR. JULY 13, 1798

No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of four or five days, with my Sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol. It was published almost immediately after in the little volume of which so much has been said in these Notes.--(The Lyrical Ballads, as first published at Bristol by Cottle.)

Background to the poem

In 1792, Wordsworth returned from Revolutionary France. His time there had impressed him deeply, and he returned to England believing that social reform was necessary, not just in France, but in his home country too. As it happened, the route taken by the revolutionaries disappointed him greatly as the years went on. However, in 1793 he was still fired up by the events he had witnessed.

Lack of funds had necessitated the poet's return to England, but he had left behind a

pregnant Annette Vallon. He intended to return to her, if possible, but he was less than certain how this might be achieved. He had no job and no real prospects. It seemed that he would have to buckle down and apply himself. However, rather than do this, Wordsworth went on a walking tour of Wales in the summer of 1793. He was inspired and moved by the beauty of the landscape there, and he often thought of it in the following years.

Five years later, a more mature Wordsworth returned to the Wye Valley with his sister, Dorothy. He was no longer the passionate, fiery youth of 1793. Time, and the turn taken by the French Revolution in the years following his return to England, had changed him. He was more mature and surer of himself and his path in life than he had been on his first visit to that part of Wales.

Analysis

Lines 1-22

Five years have passed since Wordsworth last visited this place. The mention of ‘five long winters!’ suggests that the poet has undergone hardships in that time. Returning to this area, he finds it little changed, and it is a source of tranquillity for him. The poet is very much in the poem; it is not simply a typical 18th century description of a beautiful scene. The word ‘I’ is repeated several times in this opening section, and the effect of the landscape on the poet is highlighted.

The descriptions of the place are beautiful, and the sense of calm is conveyed by the ‘soft inland murmur’ of the mountain-springs, the ‘quiet of the sky’ and the ‘wreaths of smoke / sent up, in silence’. The language used is simple, in contrast with the poetic conventions of the time. Wordsworth believed that poetry should be written simply, so as to be accessible to any reader. The simplicity of the language also mirrors the natural simplicity of the scene he is describing. It is as if Wordsworth is having a conversation with us, the readers. There is a sense of immediacy, of the poet's thoughts being formed even as he writes, in lines 15 and 16. He checks himself and reconsiders the wording, ‘These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild’. This conversational tone, and the revisiting of observations already made, reminds me of the work of Robert Frost, who does the same in his poetry. I am thinking in particular of his description of the saw in ‘Out-Out-’, which he says ‘Leaped out of the boy's hand, or seemed to leap - / He must have given the hand’. In both cases, the effect of this rewording is to make us, as readers, feel that we are listening to the poet actively thinking as he contemplates the event or the landscape which is the subject

of the poem.

There is more than physical descriptions in these opening lines. Wordsworth speaks of the 'lofty cliffs' which 'impress / Thoughts of a more deep seclusion; and connect/ The landscape with the quiet of the sky.' The scene moves the poet and causes him to dwell on isolation, and also the interconnectedness of things. This is not an objective description of a beautiful scene; Wordsworth is contemplating many things, such as memory, the passage of time and isolation, as well as telling us of the natural loveliness of the hills and valleys.

Lines 22-49

The poet reflects on the passage of time, and the way in which the beauty of this scene has remained with him and offered him solace over the last five years. He has often recollected 'These beauteous forms' when weary of city life. When he felt lonely, he was comforted by the 'tranquil restoration' offered by his memories. In this way, the poem reminds me of Yeats' 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', when the poet thinks of the isle when standing on 'pavements grey'. In both cases, nature is a healing force, and the memory of its beauty can bring great joy.

Wordsworth is also affected morally by the memories of this place. He attributes to it the acts of 'kindness and of love' which have been encouraged by his recollections. As well as being physically and morally uplifted by the images of the Wye Valley, the poet says that he has been enabled, through his memories of the place, to see life differently. He has been able to 'see into the life of things' and achieve a 'serene and blessed mood'. In other words, he has become aware of a greater spiritual realm and has felt linked to the universe when in this state of heightened awareness.

Lines 49 - 57

The poet expresses some doubts in these lines. He wonders if perhaps he has gone to far and is being a little melodramatic in supposing that he has really understood the world better because of this beautiful place. However, he undoubtedly feels better when he thinks of the landscape during those times when he is 'In darkness'. The language in these lines is excited and fast flowing, reflecting the poet's strength of feeling.

Lines 58 -111

Wordsworth recalls us to the present with the words 'And now'. He looks around him and

he remembers how this place has offered him comfort and joy in the past, and how it will do so again in the future: 'in this moment there is life and food / For future years'. There is a blending of past, present and future here. The poet thinks of his younger self, as he was when he stood in this spot five years ago, and he reflects on how different he was then. He was immature, but passionate, and moved to 'aching joys' and 'dizzy raptures' by the beauty of nature. Now, he says, his joys and pleasures are less intense, but he has other qualities which he did not possess then. He can take the time to look at the natural world on a deeper level, and appreciate it more as a result, perhaps. He is no longer in the grip of 'thoughtless youth', and he claims that mature, adult approach to life is an 'Abundant recompense' for that loss of carefree, passionate youth. He has learned much, and has seen 'The still, sad music of humanity'. His understanding of the hardships faced by many of his fellow men has matured him and made him a better poet and a better person. He has also developed a far greater appreciation of the spiritual side of himself. He has felt 'A presence', and can no longer look at nature in the heedless, excited way he did as a young man. There is, he feels, a greater force at work than he had previously realised. He senses it, but he cannot describe it fully. However, the belief that this force 'rolls through all things' has helped him to see a connection between man and nature that he had not seen before.

Lines 111 – 159

The poet now addresses his sister and says that, through her, he is able to see what he once was. She seems to see the landscape much in the way he did five years ago, and her appreciation of it brings him joy. In here, he sees 'The language of my former heart'. She is not as philosophical as he, and she sees the scenery as simply an example of great natural beauty.

Wordsworth tells us of the ways in which nature can benefit them. It educates them, brings them great joy, brings them peace and gives them a sense that there is something profound at the heart of our lives. Nothing can take away the gifts that nature brings; neither 'evil tongues' nor 'selfish men' can undermine the pleasure he gets from the natural world.

The poet prays that nature will always help his sister and that it will offer her the same solace it has offered him, should she find herself unhappy or afraid. He also prays that his sister will always remember him and the time they spent together by this 'delightful stream'. Having her with him now has made this time 'more dear', as has his deeper appreciation of nature, which has come about as a result of his maturity.

She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
-Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky:

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

Background to the poem

This short poem is one of five 'Lucy poems' composed between 1798 and 1801, when Wordsworth was in Germany. Critics have long argued over the identity of the mysterious 'Lucy'. Some say she is simply an idealised version of perfect English womanhood, others say she is based on his sister Dorothy, and others think she is simply a literary device. It seems unlikely that 'Lucy' is based on Dorothy Wordsworth, because Dorothy lived to a ripe old age. There is, however, the possibility that 'Lucy' (I will not apostrophise her from this point on) was based on the poet's musings on the possible loss of his beloved sister. Wordsworth sent the poems to his friend, Coleridge, who later wrote, 'Some months ago Wordsworth transmitted to me a most sublime Epitaph. Whether it had any reality, I cannot say. Most probably, in some gloomier moment he had fancied the moment in which his sister might die.' Coleridge was Wordsworth's friend, and if he was unsure of the origins of Lucy, then we are unlikely to find the truth now, some one hundred and sixty years after the poet's death.

Those who believe Lucy was a real person have gone to great trouble over the years in an effort to find mention of someone of that name in the registers of births and deaths in the Lake District, but to no avail. They argue that Wordsworth based most of his poetry on real people and places, and so would be unlikely to simply create a fictitious character on whom to base this series of poems. Their searches have yielded no evidence thus far, and it seems that the identity of Lucy must remain a mystery.

It has been argued that Lucy is based on Rousseau's 'Émile', the story of a hypothetical boy who is raised in the countryside and learns to reason by suffering the consequences of his actions, while at the same time being guided by an understanding tutor. Such a natural upbringing, Rousseau believed, was more beneficial than the education offered by a sophisticated society.

Wordsworth himself was often questioned on the issue, but refused to comment. The poems were not written as part of a series, and it was only after Wordsworth's death that they were gathered together and treated as a group. The theories continue to abound, and nobody is any closer to establishing a concrete truth, it seems. Perhaps the identity of the 'Maid' is unimportant. By creating Lucy, Wordsworth could meditate on certain philosophical ideas and further explore the nature of man, and that is a more important legacy than the argument over whether or not the girl actually existed.

Analysis

In the first stanza, Wordsworth describes Lucy as having lived in an isolated place, where the paths, or 'ways' were not walked upon. There is, of course, a paradox here. If nobody walks on a path, then it does not exist. Paths are created by people walking on them. One interpretation of this would be to say that Wordsworth is simply stressing that the area is quiet and almost untouched by man. However, as there are a number of other contradictions in the poem, it is probably wise to look at them a little more closely and see if there is a unifying thread or any sort of explanation. One way to look at it is to say that perhaps Wordsworth's use of contradictions gives the poem a dream-like quality. The poem does not need to be true, or even credible, to be powerful. (The 'springs of Dove' are not real, for example.) We know it cannot be factual, but that does not take from the central message, which is the perfection of this 'fair maid', or the idea of her, and the poet's sense of loss at her passing. The tone appears mournful, and we may be inclined to pity this 'Maid' who lived and died, seemingly unnoticed.

The paradoxes continue in the last two lines of this quatrain. The poet says that there was nobody to praise the girl, and 'very few' to love her. Again, we have to wonder how this can be? If there were even a few people to love her, then they would have praised her, surely? Or is Wordsworth saying that in this quiet, rural place, and in this simple way of life, there was no overt praise, no public praise? Is he contrasting it with the more sophisticated, but less sincere, city life in which public recognition is often more important than true worth? This is an idea we can easily relate to, if we think of our world of reality TV and the ten seconds of fame afforded to all sorts of people who have actually achieved very little of note. Gaudy, cheap fame and fortune may be the 'praise' to which Wordsworth is referring here.

If we look at the first stanza again, then, we can view it as a contrast between the public and the private worlds. There is no public acknowledgement, no lavish praise, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. The innocent, gentle life of the countryside is held up as something pure and beautiful. This reading changes the tone slightly. From being a sorrowful description of someone who died, seemingly unloved, we can now see that Lucy's life was one of peace and simplicity. Wordsworth values these aspects of rural life, and Lucy is an example of perfection and beauty. She may be Wordsworth's muse: an embodiment of all that is ideal and natural.

In the second stanza, Wordsworth tells us more about the enigmatic Lucy. She is compared to 'A violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye!' The metaphor comparing the girl to a violet is an interesting one. It tells of her shy beauty, but there is more to it than that. Violets play an important role in many myths and legends. They are associated with love, death, humility and mourning. They appear in stories from Ancient Greece, European folktales and Christian tales of saints. There are several accounts of violets springing up on the graves of saints and virgins. It is likely that Wordsworth would have been well aware of all these associations, and they strengthen the idea of Lucy as someone who was pure and natural, as well as emphasising the poet's sense of loss at her passing.

The last two lines of the second stanza offer a contrast to this idea of Lucy as a shy, simple girl. She is compared to a star 'shining in the sky.' Interestingly, this star is said to shine when no others do. The brightest stars (actually planets – Venus or Jupiter, depending on the time of year) are visible before any others. Lucy's solitary nature and individuality is highlighted here. She shines brightly on her own, before the other stars appear. We may imagine that they are all similar and that none stands out from the others. But Lucy does. She may not shine in the places others do, or at the times others do, but she is unique. This

reinforces the idea that Lucy is someone who shines brightly in her own sphere. Her world exists beyond 'the untrodden ways', or busy, urban life. Others may need public praise and acknowledgement, but Lucy is a treasure in her world. She is not concerned with, or obsessed by fame. Those who know where to look – whether it is in the shelter of a stone, or in the sky at a time when no stars may be expected to shine – can see and appreciate her beauty and radiance. She does not need to push herself forward in order to be admired by such people.

There is also the possibility that Wordsworth is saying that only a poet is capable of praising Lucy. Her loveliness may go unnoticed by the people around her, but he is able to express his appreciation of her.

The third stanza deals with the poet's reaction to Lucy's passing. She 'lived unknown', so it might be expected that she would die unknown too. And indeed, according to Wordsworth, few knew that she had 'ceased to be'. However, her death affected him profoundly. His exclamation, 'and oh, the difference to me!' is powerful and heartfelt. The simplicity of the language and the words left unsaid add to the idea of the poet's anguish. I am reminded of Robert Frost's restrained yet powerful exclamation, 'But the hand!' in 'Out, Out -'. Sometimes it is in the words not spoken that the poet best conveys his emotion. We are compelled to use our imagination to provide the missing words, and this involvement can only add to our appreciation of the depth of feeling. Wordsworth does not need to tell us in detail how heartfelt his sorrow is. We see in the emphatic way he describes the loss of Lucy. He is profoundly moved and keenly feels the loss of this young girl.

As with every poem by Wordsworth on the Leaving Cert course, this poem celebrates the wonder and beauty of nature. Lucy is praised for her connection to nature, and for her distance from the public, urban world. She is a child of nature, and she is worthy of love for that reason, even if others cannot see her worth.

If we argue that Lucy is an embodiment of the poetic muse, then why does Wordsworth allow her to die in this poem? He seems to be the only one who appreciates her beauty, and perhaps that is why, to the wider world, she appears to die. They may not care, but the 'difference' to Wordsworth is profound. The poet may be commenting on the shallowness of public life, in which worth is judged by fame. Few knew or loved Lucy, but her loss deeply affected Wordsworth.

Wordsworth wrote this poem shortly after he had bought and read a book of British ballads.

This poem is written in ballad form, with an ABAB rhyme-scheme. The language is simple, as befits a poem about a simple, natural girl. Ballads are written in a narrative style, and this is no exception. As with most ballads, the style is dramatic and there is an otherworldly quality to the poem. The paradoxical nature of the first and second stanzas seem to hint that the girl in question is somehow ethereal and exists outside of our world. Although the language is simple, the poem is not. Wordsworth creates a sense of mystery not only by his reference to a girl who seems untraceable, but also by his use of paradoxes. This seemingly straightforward ballad makes us think.

Wordsworth uses assonance and alliteration to great effect in this short ballad. The repeated broad vowel sounds throughout add to the mournful tone and the sense of mystery in the poem. The sibilance in each stanza brings to mind both Lucy's gentleness and the poet's wistful longing for her.



Wordsworth - Quotes

“Come forth into the light of things, Let Nature be your teacher.”

“Nature never did betray, The heart that loved her.”

“With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things.”

“When from our better selves we have too long been parted by the hurrying world, and droop. Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired, how gracious, how benign (is) solitude.”

“For I have learned to look on nature, not as in the hour of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes the still, sad music of humanity.”

“Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge - it is as immortal as the heart of man.”

And Finally...

Although this poem is not on your course, it is one to which you might relate. It also contains some useful quotes which you could use in your essay.

THE TABLES TURNED

UP! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun, above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:

