

Core Course 9: British Romantic Literature

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William Blake

Introduction to the *Songs of Innocence* : ‘The Lamb’, ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ ;

Songs of Experience: ‘Tyger’, ‘The Chimney Sweeper’

William Blake (1757-1827) has flourished as an English poet in the late 18th and early 19th century and is famously denoted as the early romantics (“Precursors of Romanticism”). This group includes poets like Robert Burns, William Collins, Cowper, Goldsmith and Blake. These poets have demonstrated the transition from Neo-classicism (first half of the 18th century) to Romanticism (early 19th century). They paved the way for the advent of the great Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and Keats. If the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge in 1798 is considered as the clarion call of English Romanticism, then Blake is no doubt a ‘precursor of Romanticism’. The theme, treatment and style of his poetry are quite reasonably being considered a ‘Romantic’ poet. Incidentally, as A. C. Baugh observes, the “adjective ‘romantic’ (with variants) first appeared in English in the mid-seventeenth century as a word to describe the fabulous, the extravagant, the fictitious, and the unreal. From this disrepute it was rescued during the following hundred years by being used to describe pleasing scenes and situations of the sort appearing in ‘romantic’ fiction and poetry. Gradually the term Romanticism the resurgence of instinct and emotion which the prevalent rationalism of the eighteenth century never wholly suppressed” (Baugh, *Literary History of England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London and New York, 1992). William Blake may justifiably be described as a lyricist, a symbolist, a mystic and a visionary poet. His poetry was a conscious departure from the formal restrictions and artificial diction of Augustan or Neo-classical poetry of the first half of the 18th century. Blake’s poetry essentially communicates his mystic-visionary experiences of the world as well as the universe.

Blake apprehends truth in terms of opposites. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he writes: “Without Contraries is no Progression”. Hence in Blake’s poetry one can find two opposite sets of symbols. On the one hand we see three of the major symbols in Blake, namely, the lamb, the child and the day (or light), and on the other we find their opposites in the tiger, the grown up man and night (or darkness). The first set of symbols is associated with ‘Innocence’ and the second set is related to ‘Experience’. Blake’s most famous volumes of poetry, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, are thus found to employ respectively these two sets of symbols along with many others, which also help highlighting these two states of man. Blake’s vision of ‘Innocence’ is associated with the pre-Fall state of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, when the father and mother of mankind were in a happy, blissful and innocent state. On the contrary, ‘Experience’ is associated with the fallen state of Adam and Eve, when they lost their innocence after tasting the fruit of the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ and in consequence were expelled from Heaven. Very meaningfully Blake in 1794 published *Songs of Innocence* (1789)

and *Songs of Experience* (1793) together under the title *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Blake always tried to harp on the fact that truth can be grasped in its totality only when we take into consideration the contrary states of things – ‘Innocence’ and ‘Experience’, good and bad, virtue and vice, and the like. Our vision of life is bound to be partial and incomplete if we have the idea only of ‘Innocence’ or of ‘Experience.’

The maturity of Blake’s poetic spirit was, in fact, largely due to two great incidents in contemporary Europe, namely the French Revolution of 1789 and the Industrial Revolution the effects of which were clearly evidenced in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The revolutionary spirit in many of Blake’s poems and their essentially underlying notes of deep humanism were to a great extent influenced by these two epoch making historical-political happenings. The major works written by William Blake are— *Poetical Sketches*(1783); *Songs of Innocence*(1789); *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793); *Songs of Experience*(1793); *Visions of the Daughter of Albion*(1793); *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794); *Urizen* (1794).

The Lamb(Text)

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, & bid thee feed
By the stream & o’er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, wooly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb.
He is meek, & he is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

Annotations/ notes:

1. The poem “The Lamb” appears in William Blake’s collection of poems *Songs of Innocence* (1789).
2. It was written in the form of a dialogue between the child and the lamb – a poem of care, affection and simple communication. The series of questions asked in the first section of the poem are answered in the following section.
3. The lamb is the innocent and meek creature created by God. Blake has used the ‘lamb’ as the symbol of innocence.
4. thee(l. 1) - you

5. Dost thou (l. 2) – Do you
6. o'er(l. 4) – over
7. mead(l. 4) – meadow; open field
8. wooly(l. 6) – made of wool; very soft
9. tender (l. 7) – soft
10. vales (l. 8) – valleys
11. He(l. 13) – Jesus
12. Thy (l. 13) - your
13. 'He is called by thy name'(l. 13) – Biblical allusion, Jeremiah xiv:9 “Thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not”
14. 'He is meek, & he is mild'(l. 15) – Charles Wesley's hymn “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild” may have a reference to this line
15. 'I a child, & thou a lamb, / We are called by his name'(ll. 17-18) –The child, the lamb and Christ seem to form a Trinity.

Critical Analysis of “The Lamb”

William Blake's poem “The Lamb” has a pastoral and protective natural setting in which the little boy and the lamb have a dialogue between them. The poem begins with a series of questions asked to the lamb by the little child, and in the next section the child gives answers to those questions. The answers of the child are indicative of the profound faith that may rest only in a simple and care free heart which is still unadulterated and free from the complexities of the outer world. The poem begins with the child's question about the maker or creator of the lamb, whether the lamb at all knows who made a beautiful creature like it. He then goes on to give the details of the features of the lamb. The creator, for example, has given it life and also the softest of all clothing in the form of a bright and delightful woolly cover. The lamb is also gifted with a very tender and sweet voice. When the lamb bleats, the entire valley seems to rejoice. And above all, the creator has made the stream and the wide meadow for the lamb to graze and feed itself. The poem shows the generosity of the creator and his love for the lamb. The child is inquisitive about the lamb and its creation. The first section ends with a repetition of the first two lines, and the repetition may imply the speaker's earnest address, affection and intimacy to the lamb.

The second section begins with a repetition of the line ‘Little Lamb, I'll tell thee’. The little child answers to the questions he has asked in the first section without any anxiety of waiting on the part of the listener, the lamb. The tender affection symbolizes the innocence in the child speaker. The world of ‘Innocence’, is a world of tenderness, love, pure affection and unconditional sympathy and attraction. The child's answers are his deep faith in God. God is the creator of the blessed lamb. God is the supreme father of all earthly creatures. The idea is expressed in a very simple way by associating the lamb with Christ, the son of God. Jesus “calls himself a Lamb”. Jesus was ‘meek’ and ‘mild’. He took birth on the earth as a little child. The

lamb is also, like Jesus, 'meek' and 'mild' - in fact, the meekest of all creatures. The child with his simple and profound faith associates himself and the lamb with Jesus: "I a child, & thou a lamb, / We are called by his name". All are blessed by the supreme father that is God. The poem thus ends with a confidence and trust, which are the hallmarks of the world of 'Innocence', with a repetition of the line "Little Lamb, God bless thee". Another important point is that the questions asked in the poem have their simple answers, unlike the questions in "The Tyger" of the 'Experience' book. The questions in "The Tyger" are more complex and they remain unanswered. The poem "The Lamb" is one of the representative poems of Blake's "Innocence" book. The lamb itself is the universal symbol of innocence. The world of 'Innocence' is a protective world. It is also a world of care, love, communication and unmixed delight. In his pictorial illustration of the poem Blake has depicted a protective natural world with tall trees entwined by the creepers. The doves, the symbol of peace, are placed on the cottage roof. A stream of clear water, the very symbol of life, flows playfully in the forefront. Innocence is also closely associated with light and joy. Words like 'bright' 'delight' and 'rejoice' in the first section of the poem are suggestive of these features of 'Innocence'. The natural setting of the poem, its expression of simple faith and unmixed joy lend the poem its essential pastoral character. However, Blake has perfectly mixed the Christian spirit of charity, love and compassion into the pastoral texture of the poem.

In the second section of the poem both the child and the lamb are associated with Jesus, the son of God. God is the Father and the supreme Creator of the world. He blesses us all and He will bless the lamb. The simple but very profound message of Christianity is thus communicated through the little child's communication to the lamb. Jesus was meek and mild. Jesus was the very embodiment of love and charity. The lamb in Blake's imagination identifies with Jesus and forms a Trinity of Child, Lamb and Father (God). Blake called his poems 'songs' and, therefore, the element of musicality in the poems included in Songs of Innocence and of Experience can hardly be missed. He might have been influenced by Charles Wesley's hymn book *Hymns for Children* which was published in 1763, especially the hymn beginning with "Gentle Jesus, Meek and mild". Blake has used in the poem very simple rhyme scheme. The poem is equally divided into two stanzas of ten lines each. Repetitions are there in the opening and closing lines of each stanza. Such repetitions sound like the refrains of a song. The words are mostly simple and monosyllabic, for example, 'made', 'gave', 'feed', 'mead', 'life', 'bless' etc. Lines are also evenly composed. The first two and last two lines of each stanza contain six syllables, while the lines in between contain seven syllables each.

The Tyger(Text)

Tyger!Tyger! Burning bright.
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?
 In what furnace was thy brain?
 What the anvil? What dread grasp
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
 When the stars threw down their spears,
 And water'd heaven with their tears,
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
 Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?
 Annotations/ notes:

1. The poem "The Tyger" belongs to William Blake's collection of poems *Songs of Experience* (1793).
2. The poem is set in contrast to "The Lamb" of the Innocence book, and when we read "The Tyger" in combination with "The lamb" we can understand the dualities which Blake was so intent in showing in his pair poems belonging to the two different collections of poems – *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.
3. 'forests of the night' (l. 2) – In the symbolic texture of Blake's poetry 'night' or darkness is associated with 'Experience', complexities, hazards and even evil. Again, 'forests' in the Platonic sense stands symbolically for material life. The trees in the forests dim the light and create obstacles on the path of simple life.
4. 'immortal hand or eye' (l. 3) – A reference to the Creator of the world or God who alone can 'frame' or design the 'fearful symmetry' of the tiger.
5. 'symmetry' (l. 4) – COD defines the word as 'the quality of being made up of exactly similar parts facing each other or around an axis' or as a 'correct or pleasing proportion of parts'. Blake has used the word very effectively to evoke the sense of a perfect frame and proportionate design in the creation of the tiger by the Creator. The sense of awe and wonder are instantly aroused in the reader's imagination by the phrase 'fearful symmetry'.
6. The entire process of the creation of the tiger is hinted at in the second, third and fourth stanzas of the poem through a series of interrogations.
7. Thine (l. 6) – your (the tiger's)
8. he (l. 7) – the Creator (God)
9. aspire (l. 7) – be ambitious; rise high. Creating a creature like the tiger is a very high or ambitious project on the part of the Creator.
10. seize (l. 8) – catch; keep in control. Without a daring hand it is impossible to 'seize' the fire. The sense of awe is evoked by the images related to the tiger or the making of the tiger.
11. sinews (l. 10) – 'the parts of a structure or system that give it strength or bind it together' (COD).

12. 'twist the sinews of thy heart' (l. 10) – The heart of the tiger, according to Blake, must be very powerful and strong. The brute force is accumulated in its heart. No ordinary 'art' or device and no common hand can frame the structures of the tiger's powerful heart. The poet is wondering at the Creator's supreme power which alone can think of making a tiger.

13. l. 13-16 – These lines which constitute the fourth stanza of the poem give us the idea of the workshop or smithy where the form of the tiger was shaped. The 'hammer', 'chain', 'furnace' and 'anvil' are the tools used by a blacksmith and they immediately bring the image of a blacksmith's workshop where the blacksmith gives desired shapes to the hot iron by putting it on the anvil and beating it with a hammer.

14. 'the stars throw down their spears' (l. 17) – "the stars threw down their spears & fled naked away" (Blake's *The Four Zoas*). The line can be understood as the stars sending their faint rays of light downward from the sky.

15. 'water'd heaven with their tears' (l. 18) – The word 'tears' connotes sadness, grief or anguish. In *Urizen* Blake associates *Urizen* with the stars, and *Urizen* weeps in anguish. However, the idea of watering heaven with tears may metaphorically be taken as the sky flooded with the light of the stars. It thus indicates the night time (as initially referred to in the second line of the poem: 'In the forests of the night' and, again, as an answer to the 'When' at the beginning of the fifth stanza).

16. 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' (l. 20) –The Lamb and the Tiger, which represent two contrary states, are here juxtaposed. The poet apparently is amazed to think how the same Creator can create two such creatures of absolutely contradictory natures. But actually in Blake's vision of the reality of life stark opposites – the meek and the fierce – coexist. The idea may perhaps be taken from the Bible, Revelation 5 ("The Scroll and the Lamb").

17. The last stanza of the poem repeats the opening stanza with only one change. The word 'could' is replaced with the word 'Dare' in the final stanza. The deliberate change significantly asserts the unusual courage of the Creator which is required to create the tiger.

Critical summary of "The Tiger"

"The Tyger" is one of the diversely interpreted poems of William Blake. It is included in *Songs of Experience* as a contrast to the poem "The Lamb" in *Songs of Innocence*. The world of 'Experience', unlike that of 'Innocence', is a complex, critical, harsh, and painful one. If the God in "The Lamb" is blissful and loving, the God in "The Tyger" is full of wrath and power. They, however, are one – the same God. Blake thus seems to give us the message that the co-existence of 'Innocence' and 'Experience' are not two separate entities, but just two different states of human life or development. Both the states together give a complete vision of life. Otherwise our ideas are bound to remain incomplete and partial. The poem starts with the speaker's address to the tiger, the wonderful creature in the world which in the nocturnal forests shines brightly. There is a perfect symmetry in the shaping of the tiger which evokes wonder and awe in the speaker's mind, and he questions what 'immortal hand or eye' may be there behind the shaping of the 'fearful symmetry' of the tiger. The rhetorical question remains unanswered, but it seems to unmistakably hint at the supreme Creator, that is God, whose 'immortal hand or eye' alone can design the tiger.

The second, third and fourth stanzas are chiefly concerned with the process of the making of the tiger. The fiery eyes of the tiger are unearthly, and this fire must have been brought from some 'distant deep or skies', for nowhere on the earth this fire can be seen burning at all. No human hand can even think of seizing this fire. Nor can a man ever have a flight on the daring wings of imagination which is necessary to conceive a creature like the tiger. Hence the questions: "On what wings dare he aspire? What the hand dare seize the fire?" The wonder-struck poet then thinks of the very powerfully vibrating 'heart' of the tiger. The tiger's heart, according to Blake, is powerfully and strongly built. The brute force is accumulated in its heart. No ordinary 'art' or device and no common hand can frame the structures of the tiger's powerful heart. The poet is wondering at the creator's supreme power, courage and capacity of making the tiger. However, the rhetorical questions reach their culmination in the fourth stanza where, almost breathlessly, the speaker puts a series of five questions in just four little lines.

The fourth stanza gives us an image of a blacksmith's workshop with various tools like the 'hammer', the 'chain', the 'furnace' and the 'anvil'. The blacksmith with the help of these tools clasps the burning red-hot piece of metal (iron) and hammers it heavily to give the desired shapes. Blake the visionary here similarly thinks of some divine smithy where the supreme creator must have shaped the brain of the tiger, clasping its 'deadly terrors' in his 'dread grasp'. In the penultimate stanza the poet again turns his attention to the Creator. The first two lines of the stanza refer to the time, that is night, with the help of two brilliant and suggestive images – the image of the stars throwing down their spears from above and that of watering 'heaven with their (the stars') tears'. The first one may poetically be understood as the rays of the star light coming down to the earth from above, and the second one as the heaven being flooded by the starlight. The visionary poet almost can see in his imagination how the sky is washed off by the lights of the heavenly bodies. The words like 'spears' and 'tears', however, leave scopes for more meanings of these lines. One may refer to The Four Zoas where Urizen is found weeping and the anguished "stars threw down their spears & fled naked away". Whatever may be the other possible interpretations, the lines here are indicative of the night time, as mentioned in the phrase 'forests of the night' in the opening part of the poem. The poet questions how the creator might have reacted when at night he had seen his own creation (the tiger): "Did he smile his work to see?" And he questions with utter amazement how the same creator who created the lamb, the meekest of all animals, can make the 'fearful symmetry' of the tiger, the fiercest of all creatures. The last stanza of the poem is a repetition of the opening stanza with the change of only one word. The word 'Could' in the fourth line of the opening stanza is here replaced by 'Dare'. The replacement is stylistically much significant. While the softer word 'could' is suggestive of simple capability to perform some act, the stronger word 'dare' demands an additional strength or courage over simple capability to do it. Simple ability is not enough to take the challenge of creating a formidable creature like the tiger, but requires a daring heart and hand for it. The replacement of 'Could' by 'Dare' in the last line of the poem is indicative of this.

"The Tyger" is certainly one of the most critical poems of Blake and critics have given different interpretations of the poem as well as of the tiger symbol. Stewart Crehan, for example, in his book *Blake in Context* says that "The Tyger" is a "response to the terrible, new born beauty of violent revolution". There is no doubt that the French Revolution of 1789 created a great impact on English Romanticism, but it will be a far-fetched imagination to describe "The Tyger" as a topical poem about the Revolution. The poem and the design of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* hardly support such a view. Another Blake critic, Michael Davis claims in his

book William Blake: A New Kind of Man that “Blake moves entirely into the visionary world” in his poem “The Tyger”. Visionary elements are no doubt there in the poem, especially in such lines as “In what distant deeps or skies/ Burnt the fire of thine eyes?” and “the stars threw down their spears/ And water’d heaven with their tears”. But Blake was not ‘entirely’ in the world of vision in the process of composition of “The Tyger”. Actually in “The Tyger” Blake has given a perfect expression to most of the elements associated in his imagination with ‘Experience’, the opposite state of ‘Innocence’. From the idyllic beauty and protected state of life, from unawareness and carefree delight, from confidence and faith in “The Lamb” we are in the world of ‘Experience’ – the world of knowledge, complexities, pain, and darkness. The tiger stands symbolically for the fierce forces which coexist in the world with all the mild things represented by the lamb. Finally, the poem is very tightly structured with tetrameter lines which rhyme together perfectly. All the six stanzas are evenly formed. In fact, “The Tyger” is one of Blake’s most faultlessly composed poems. As typical of Blake’s poetry, the words are mostly monosyllabic and simple. But they are so well chosen and perfectly arranged that the lyrical flow remains smooth and unhindered.

Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey

William Wordsworth, (born April 7, 1770, Cockermouth, Cumberland, England—died April 23, 1850, Rydal Mount, Westmorland), English poet whose *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), written with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped launch the English Romantic movement.

The poem commonly known as ‘Tintern Abbey’ actually has a much longer title. When the poem first appeared in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) as a last-minute addition, it bore the title “Lines Written (or Composed) a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798”. William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote the poem after visiting the ruins of the medieval abbey on the England-Wales border, and was so pleased with it he sent it to his publishers, asking it to be included, at the eleventh hour, in the collection of poems he and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge had written.

The partnership between Wordsworth and Coleridge, rooted in one marvelous year (1797–98) in which they “together wantoned in wild Poesy,” had two consequences for Wordsworth. Stimulated by Coleridge and under the healing influences of nature and his sister, Dorothy, Wordsworth began in 1797–98 to compose the short lyrical and dramatic poems for which he is best remembered by many readers. Some of these were affectionate tributes to Dorothy, some were tributes to daffodils, birds, and other elements of “Nature’s holy plan,” and some were portraits of simple rural people intended to illustrate basic truths of human nature. Many of the short poems were written to a daringly original program formulated jointly by Wordsworth and Coleridge, and aimed at breaking the decorum of Neo-classical verse. These poems appeared in 1798 in a slim, anonymously authored volume entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, which opened with Coleridge’s long poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and closed with Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” All but three of the intervening poems were Wordsworth’s, and, as he declared in the “preface” to a second edition two years later, their object was “to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them...in a selection of language really used by men,...tracing in them...the primary laws of our nature.” Most of the poems were dramatic in form, designed to reveal the character of the speaker. The manifesto and the accompanying poems thus set forth a new style, a new vocabulary, and new subjects for poetry, all of them foreshadowing 20th-century developments.

Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798

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,
That 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 beautiful 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 have no slight or 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-extinguished 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, not 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!

The poem begins with the speaker, Wordsworth himself, having returned to a spot on the banks of the river Wye that he has not seen for five long years. This place is very dear to him and is just as beautiful and mystical as it was when he left. The “beauteous forms” of the landscape have not been lost from his mind though. They have stayed with him through his absence and supported him. Whenever there was a moment he felt trapped in the modern world or dragged down by “dreary” life he would cast his mind back to this specific spot. It is here he finds solace. In fact, this landscape has taken him farther than one might expect. Due to its beauty and the importance that it holds in the speaker’s mind, it has allowed him to disregard his own body. He finds greater value in the soul and the “deep power of joy” that can be found in all things. The speaker tells of how when he was here five years ago he ran like a child through the countryside. He was enthralled by everything he saw and desperate to take it all in. He was acting as a man escaping from something he dreaded, not relishing something he loves. Since this time he has matured now understands that Nature is more important than the base satisfaction it can provide. He feels within it a “presence” which will now support him for all time to come. This “presence” is the unity of all things.

In the final stanza of the poem it becomes clear that this entire time the poet was speaking to his sister, Dorothy. Dorothy is with him on the banks of the Wye and he has been attempting to explain to her why he is the way he is. He hopes that she will share in his joy and give her heart over to Nature as he has. The poet tells his sister that there is no risk in this choice and that she should allow the beauty of the world to move her. The poem concludes with Wordsworth telling his sister that Nature, and this moment that they have shared together, will always be there for her. Even when he is gone.

The final lines reiterate to the reader and the poet’s listener why this place is important to the writer. He values it for what it is worth on its own terms and what it has provided him, as well as what it might provide to his sister who is as of yet not as devoted as he is. He will remember this moment for its beauty as well as for whom he was with.

Detailed Analysis of the Poem:

First Stanza

Lines 1-8

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,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

This piece begins with a twenty-two line stanza that introduces the setting, emotions, and main themes of the poem. In the first lines the speaker, Wordsworth himself, makes clear that he has returned a place he has not been for “Five years,” or “five summers,” the bank of the river Wye in Derbyshire, England. These years that he has been away from the landscape which felt excruciating long. As if they were made up entirely of “five long winters!”

Wordsworth has finally come back to where he can hear “again...These waters,” and see them “rolling” down from the “mountain-springs.” These sounds that the speaker is hearing again for the first time are romanticized and described as being a “soft inland murmur” as if whispering voices are coming from somewhere farther “inland” than the speaker can see or detect.

He continues to reiterate that he is “Once again...behold[ing]” this place. He is looking around him and seeing steep cliffs. These cliffs are not just landmarks to admire but they force certain emotions to surface. They bring to his mind the “Thoughts of... deep seclusion.” This idea of finding peaceful seclusion in nature is not one at all unfamiliar to Wordsworth’s poetry. His status as one of the greatest poets of the Romantic period is solidified by poems such as “Lines Composed a Few Miles above...”

The whole environment around the speaker is unified in it’s peace and solitude. From the land to the sky and everything in-between; he is permanent desiring a place within it.

Lines 9-18

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!

In the next section of the first long stanza, Wordsworth continues on to say that “The day” has come where he can once more “repose,” or relax, under a “dark sycamore” tree that is growing nearby. In this part of the landscape he currently is in, and is hoping to remain, there is a “plot” that contains a “cottage” as well as “orchard-tufts.”

He is looking around at the fruit orchards and they are filled with yet “unripe fruits” and all the leaves are composed of “one green hue.” Instead of standing out in contrast against the other foliage, they are camouflaged and “lose themselves” amongst the “groves and copses,” or small collections of trees. These orchards are a hint of what is to come. Change is always present and even though the land appears the same as it did to the speaker five years ago, nothing ever truly remains the same.

Wordsworth can see from his vantage point “hedge-rows,” lines and lines of small bushes that run through the landscape. Additionally there are farms surrounding the property that run right up to the door of the cottage. There are others that live in the surrounding areas and “wreaths of smoke” are visible rising from the forest floor.

Lines 19-22

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.

This stanza concludes with four additional lines that expand on who may live in the environs. It seems to Wordsworth that, although he is not certain, that “vagrant dwellers” or “hermits” live out in the “houseless woods.” These homeless men sit “alone” in the woods; a state that the speaker envies.

Second Stanza

Lines 1-9

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

In the second stanza, consisting of twenty-eight lines, the speaker describes how the images he is now seeing anew have never truly left him.

Though the landscape has long been out of sight, he has not been separate from it. He describes it as having not been to him “As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye.” The speaker has not completely forgotten it or been blinded to it.

Often times, when he has been in “lonely rooms” in the middle of the “din / Of towns and cities,” the memories have come to him. He is able to revisit the landscape within his mind and find comfort in it. It has brought him pleasure in times of “weariness.” Replacing frustration with “sensations sweet” that penetrates to his “blood...and ...heart.” These thoughts are even able to possess his “purer mind” and bring it to a state of “tranquil restoration.”

Lines 10-19

Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or 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,

The stanza continues with Wordsworth describing how the memories bring him other “unremembered pleasure[s].” Their presence helps other happy memories to surface that have no “slight” or small, “influence / on...a good man’s life.” He needs these thoughts to continue on his path of goodness and continue to help others in any way he can. They improve him as a human being.

The next lines tell the reader what these happy thoughts might be. They could contain the times in a “man’s life” that he committed acts of “kindness and of love.”

The speaker then turns to address nature itself. He says that he “may have owed” more to it than he has yet returned. It gave him a spiritual gift that he is never going to be able to return, his “blessed mood,” or aspect in which he lives. It helped, and helps, to alleviate the weight of the world.

Lines 20-28

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.

Nature is going to affect the speaker for the rest of his life and even allow him to value the world, and the spiritual peace he has found over his “corporeal frame.” When he is “laid asleep / In body” he is able, through his “living soul,” to find a “harmony” and experience a “deep power of joy.” This joy has allowed him to see deeper into life than others do. Because he is so deeply a part of the natural world he can see “into the life of things.”

Third Stanza

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!

The third stanza of “*Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*” is shorter, consisting of only nine lines. In this short stanza the speaker addresses the possibility that the interior world in which he has been living could be “but a vain belief.” He could have been steadfast in his belief but, ignorant of the fact that he was wrong.

This thought is only fleeting and he immediately turns from it to say, “oh!” How can that possibly be the case when in “darkness” and surrounded by “joyless daylight,” or days that bring the speaker no joy even though they should, he has “turned to thee / O sylvan Wye!” He has depended on the memories of this “sylvan” or wooded paradise on the river Wye when he has been disturbed by the “fever of the world.” He is worshipful of this nature and contributes his peace and happiness to how it has changed him.

Fourth Stanza

Lines 1-8

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished 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,

The fourth stanza of the poem, which runs for fifty-four lines, begins with Wordsworth professing to a hope he holds for his current visit to this landscape. He describes how his mind is now “gleam[ing]” with thoughts that are “dim” and “half-extinguished.” He is recalling how he felt when he was here previously and that picture of his own being is being “revive[d]” once more. The speaker is reentering the headspace that he once existed in.

Additionally, he states that he hopes that from this visit he is able to gain “life and food / For future years.” This trip will, he thinks, provide him with memories that will sustain him in all the dull moments of life that are yet to come. He is re-nourishing his soul and inner paradise to which he will escape.

Lines 9-18

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

The speaker is “dar[ing] to hope” that even though he comes to this place changed from when he was here last, that everything will still be to him as it once was.

He remembers how when he first visited this landscape and “came among the hills” he was like a “roe” in how he “bounded” over the rises and falls. He crossed “deep rivers” and followed nature wherever it “led” him.

These actions he took were less like those taken by someone enamored by a new love, but more like the wild, desperate decisions of a man escaping from something “he dreads.” When he was here last he knew immediately how important this place was going to be to him and fled into the hills in a futile attempt to completely escape from his own life.

At this time in his life, nature was to him, “all in all.” It was the end all and be all of his life.

There was nothing of greater value or importance to the speaker. This is the state of mind he is once more seeking out.

Lines 19-28

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, not 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

He continues to attempt a description of how he was back then, but does not believe it will be possible. Instead of giving the reader a straight forward description, he uses metaphors and romanticized language to paint a picture of the type of emotional and spiritual state he was in. He was so consumed by the nature around him that he took it in like food. The narrator thrived on “the tall rock, / The mountain” and the dark woods around him. The feelings they created within the speaker were exacting and precise. He knew where they came from and was content to see the world as it was. He did not need fantasies or additions to the real world to make it more meaningful to him. He did not need “a remoter charm” to entrance him.

The speaker is aching for the time when nature was truly all that he needed. He remembers the joys, and how it created in him “dizzy rapture.” That time is sadly, “past.”

Lines 29-38

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

Although the speaker is saddened by the change in his condition he is not depressed. He knows that other pleasures “Have followed” and that he should not really “mourn” for the loss of the past.

He has been able to look through his base emotions and thoughts and see Nature not as he did when he was a “thoughtless youth” but as something far more sustaining. He is older now, wiser, and understands how important moments of peace are for a life lived amongst humanity. This new wisdom was enshrined in him when he “felt / A presence that disturbs” him with joyful, “elevated thoughts.” He has felt the power of God, or Nature as God, in the world that surrounds him. The narrator can take the memory of this “presence” and carry it within him.

Lines 39-48

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

What the speaker feels of this new “presence” is much more powerful than what he held inside him in the past. Before, he only took memory away with him when he left, now he has a belief that is stronger than anything else. The “presence” that he feels is like “the light of setting suns” and as powerful as “the round ocean,” air, and sky to the “mind of a man.” It is beyond comprehension and therefore, unfading and undeterred by modernity. The way in which he understands nature may have changed, but he is still a “lover” of it. He still worships the “meadows and the woods” and is thrilled in all “that we behold / From this green earth.”

He describes how nature fuels everything in the world, the world is entirely made of, and created by nature. It “impels / All thinking things.” The speaker’s [tone](#) is reverential filled with deep emotion. This tone will continue through the remaining lines of the poem as the speaker delves deeper into why exactly the natural world is so meaningful to him.

Lines 49-54

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.

In the final lines of the fourth stanza the speaker describes how even though he, and others, are apt through their sense, to hear and see things differently than how they truly are, he is still “well pleased.” He thrills in the “language” of his own senses and considers nature to be the “guardian” of his “heart,” and the steadfast supporter of his “purest thoughts.” It has been to him a “guide” as well as a “nurse.” Finally, he states, it is the “soul” of his morality. Just as the Christian God helps determine what is right and wrong for many around the world, Nature serves this purpose for the narrator.

Fifth Stanza

Lines 1-10

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,

The emotion that the reader glimpsed at the end of the last stanza is sustained through the remainder of the poem.

The speaker begins this section by stating that he will never “Suffer [his] genial spirits to decay” due to the fact that he now understands Nature. The beliefs he harbors within him are permanent. They are there with him at this present moment as he stands “upon the banks” of a river looking out on this place he loves.

At this point in the poem the narration takes a turn as it becomes clear that there is someone else with the speaker. He has not been thinking allowed but explaining himself to someone near. He calls her, “thou my dearest Friend.” She is to him as close as another person can be and he felt the need to explain to her how he has come to be the way that he is.

He listens to her as she speaks and feels the catch of his “heart.” He sees how he used to be and remembers his “former pleasures” as he looks into her “wild eyes.” Wordsworth is able, through only a short glance, is able to see in her the person he once was.

It also becomes completely clear at this time, if the reader was not yet convinced, that the speaker is Wordsworth himself.

Lines 11-24

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
He is, in this tender moment, directing his monologue to his sister, Dorothy. They are
extraordinarily close and he wishes to share with her his adoration for Nature.
The next line of the poem is one of its most important and frequently quoted.
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her;
He is searching for a way to make his sister understand that placing your heart within the hands
of Nature is without risk. It cannot break your heart or shatter your faith. Nature will, through the
years of one's life, lead a devotee from "joy to joy" and "impress" upon one "quietness and
beauty." Her life, he states, will be full of "lofty thoughts" that carry one above the "sneers" of
the modern world. One will no longer be bothered by the "dreary intercourse of daily life." There
will truly be nothing with the ability to disturb one's peace. "We" will forever know that "our"
life is "full of blessings"

Lines 25-36

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—

At this point the poem is starting to conclude. Wordsworth wants to make sure that his sister
knows that if this is the life that she desires, she should "let the moon" shine on her during her
walks. She should feel the "mountain-winds" on her skin and not resist them.
When, Wordsworth says, one has lived this way for a long time, the natural world will become a
part of one's life, guiding all decisions and choices of morality. He states that she will never
forget this place and it will become a paradise for "all sweet sounds and harmonies." When all of

this happens, and if she was to fall into “solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,” hopefully, he implores, “thou [will] remember me” and everything that has been said.

Lines 37-44

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

If, Wordsworth says, “I” have died and moved somewhere where “I no more can hear / Thy voice” hopefully she will not forget that “We stood together” on the banks of the Wye. This place is important as it is where Nature came to both the speaker and his listener. This place, Wordsworth says, should fill the future with even “holier love.” The speaker says that nature will “create” in the listener a “far deeper zeal” for the goodness of life. His sister will not be run down my “dreary” normalcy.

Lines 45-49

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!

The last five lines of the poem are spent in finalizing the speaker’s thoughts on how the future should go. He does not want his sister to forget what he has told her, nor what she herself has felt by the river. He wants her to remember how important she and the landscape around them are to him and says that even though he has been gone from this place for so long, it is dear to him. It is valuable in its own right and because it is giving the same gift it gave to him to her.

Summary

The full title of this poem is “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798.” It opens with the speaker’s declaration that five years have passed since he last visited this location, encountered its tranquil, rustic scenery,

and heard the murmuring waters of the river. He recites the objects he sees again, and describes their effect upon him: the “steep and lofty cliffs” impress upon him “thoughts of more deep seclusion”; he leans against the dark sycamore tree and looks at the cottage-grounds and the orchard trees, whose fruit is still unripe. He sees the “wreaths of smoke” rising up from cottage chimneys between the trees, and imagines that they might rise from “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,” or from the cave of a hermit in the deep forest.

The speaker then describes how his memory of these “beauteous forms” has worked upon him in his absence from them: when he was alone, or in crowded towns and cities, they provided him with “sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.” The memory of the woods and cottages offered “tranquil restoration” to his mind, and even affected him when he was not aware of the memory, influencing his deeds of kindness and love. He further credits the memory of the scene with offering him access to that mental and spiritual state in which the burden of the world is lightened, in which he becomes a “living soul” with a view into “the life of things.” The speaker then says that his belief that the memory of the woods has affected him so strongly may be “vain”—but if it is, he has still turned to the memory often in times of “fretful stir.”

Even in the present moment, the memory of his past experiences in these surroundings floats over his present view of them, and he feels bittersweet joy in reviving them. He thinks happily, too, that his present experience will provide many happy memories for future years. The speaker acknowledges that he is different now from how he was in those long-ago times, when, as a boy, he “bounded o’er the mountains” and through the streams. In those days, he says, nature made up his whole world: waterfalls, mountains, and woods gave shape to his passions, his appetites, and his love. That time is now past, he says, but he does not mourn it, for though he cannot resume his old relationship with nature, he has been amply compensated by a new set of more mature gifts; for instance, he can now “look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity.” And he can now sense the presence of something far more subtle, powerful, and fundamental in the light of the setting suns, the ocean, the air itself, and even in the mind of man; this energy seems to him “a motion and a spirit that impels / All thinking thoughts.... / And rolls through all things.” For that reason, he says, he still loves nature, still loves mountains and pastures and woods, for they anchor his purest thoughts and guard the heart and soul of his “moral being.”

The speaker says that even if he did not feel this way or understand these things, he would still be in good spirits on this day, for he is in the company of his “dear, dear (d) Sister,” who is also his “dear, dear Friend,” and in whose voice and manner he observes his former self, and beholds “what I was once.” He offers a prayer to nature that he might continue to do so for a little while, knowing, as he says, that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her,” but leads rather “from joy to joy.” Nature’s power over the mind that seeks her out is such that it renders that mind impervious to “evil tongues,” “rash judgments,” and “the sneers of selfish men,” instilling instead a “cheerful faith” that the world is full of blessings. The speaker then encourages the moon to shine upon his sister, and the wind to blow against her, and he says to her that in later years, when she is sad or fearful, the memory of this experience will help to heal her. And if he himself is dead, she can remember the love with which he worshipped nature. In that case, too, she will remember what the woods meant to the speaker, the way in which, after so many years of absence, they became more dear to him—both for themselves and for the fact that she is in them.

Form

“Tintern Abbey” is composed in blank verse, which is a name used to describe unrhymed lines in iambic pentameter. Its style is therefore very fluid and natural; it reads as easily as if it were a prose piece. But of course the poetic structure is tightly constructed; Wordsworth’s slight variations on the stresses of iambic rhythms are remarkable. Lines such as “Here, under this dark sycamore, and view” do not quite conform to the stress-patterns of the meter, but fit into it loosely, helping Wordsworth approximate the sounds of natural speech without grossly breaking his meter. Occasionally, divided lines are used to indicate a kind of paragraph break, when the poet changes subjects or shifts the focus of his discourse.

Commentary

The subject of “Tintern Abbey” is memory—specifically, childhood memories of communion with natural beauty. Both generally and specifically, this subject is hugely important in Wordsworth’s work, reappearing in poems as late as the “Intimations of Immortality” ode.

“Tintern Abbey” is the young Wordsworth’s first great statement of his principle (great) theme: that the memory of pure communion with nature in childhood works upon the mind even in adulthood, when access to that pure communion has been lost, and that the maturity of mind present in adulthood offers compensation for the loss of that communion—specifically, the ability to “look on nature” and hear “human music”; that is, to see nature with an eye toward its relationship to human life. In his youth, the poet says, he was thoughtless in his unity with the woods and the river; now, five years since his last viewing of the scene, he is no longer thoughtless, but acutely aware of everything the scene has to offer him. Additionally, the presence of his sister gives him a view of himself as he imagines himself to have been as a youth. Happily, he knows that this current experience will provide both of them with future memories, just as his past experience has provided him with the memories that flicker across his present sight as he travels in the woods.

“Tintern Abbey” is a monologue, imaginatively spoken by a single speaker to himself, referencing the specific objects of its imaginary scene, and occasionally addressing others—once the spirit of nature, occasionally the speaker’s sister. The language of the poem is striking for its simplicity and forthrightness; the young poet is in no way concerned with ostentation. He is instead concerned with speaking from the heart in a plainspoken manner. The poem’s imagery is largely confined to the natural world in which he moves, though there are some castings-out for metaphors ranging from the nautical (the memory is “the anchor” of the poet’s “purest thought”) to the architectural (the mind is a “mansion” of memory).

The poem also has a subtle strain of religious sentiment; though the actual form of the Abbey does not appear in the poem, the idea of the abbey—of a place consecrated to the spirit—suffuses the scene, as though the forest and the fields were themselves the speaker’s abbey. This idea is reinforced by the speaker’s description of the power he feels in the setting sun and in the mind of man, which consciously links the ideas of God, nature, and the human mind—as they will be linked in Wordsworth’s poetry for the rest of his life, from “It is a beauteous evening, calm and free” to the great summation of the Immortality Ode.

