

William Wordsworth was born on April 7th, 1770, in Cockermouth, Cumberland, England. Young William's parents, John and Ann, died during his boyhood. Raised amid the mountains of Cumberland alongside the River Derwent, Wordsworth grew up in a rustic society, and spent a great deal of his time playing outdoors, in what he would later remember as a pure communion with nature. In the early 1790s William lived for a time in France, then in the grip of the violent [Revolution](#); Wordsworth's philosophical sympathies lay with the revolutionaries, but his loyalties lay with England, whose monarchy he was not prepared to see overthrown. While in France, Wordsworth had a long affair with Annette Vallon, with whom he had a daughter, Caroline. A later journey to France to meet Caroline, now a young girl, would inspire the great sonnet "It is a beautiful evening, calm and free."

The chaos and bloodshed of the Reign of Terror in Paris drove William to philosophy books; he was deeply troubled by the rationalism he found in the works of thinkers such as William Godwin, which clashed with his own softer, more emotional understanding of the world. In despair, he gave up his pursuit of moral questions. In the mid-1790s, however, Wordsworth's increasing sense of anguish forced him to formulate his own understanding of the world and of the human mind in more concrete terms. The theory he produced, and the poetics he invented to embody it, caused a revolution in English literature.

Developed throughout his life, Wordsworth's understanding of the human mind seems simple enough today, what with the advent of psychoanalysis and the general Freudian acceptance of the importance of childhood in the adult psyche. But in Wordsworth's time, in what Seamus Heaney has called "Dr. Johnson's supremely adult eighteenth century," it was shockingly unlike anything that had been proposed before. Wordsworth believed (as he expressed in poems such as the "Intimations of Immortality" Ode) that, upon being born, human beings move from a perfect, idealized realm into the imperfect, un-ideal earth. As children, some memory of the former purity and glory in which they lived remains, best perceived in the solemn and joyous relationship of the child to the beauties of nature. But as children grow older, the memory fades, and the magic of nature dies. Still, the memory of childhood can offer an important solace, which brings with it almost a kind of re-access to the lost purities of the past. And the maturing mind develops the capability to understand nature in human terms, and to see in it metaphors for human life, which compensate for the loss of the direct connection.

Freed from financial worries by a legacy left to him in 1795, Wordsworth moved with his sister Dorothy to Racedown, and then to Alfoxden in Grasmere, where Wordsworth could be closer to his friend and fellow poet [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#). Together, Wordsworth and Coleridge began work on a book called *Lyrical Ballads*, first published in 1798 and reissued with Wordsworth's monumental preface in 1802.

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* represents a landmark moment for English poetry; it was unlike anything that had come before, and paved the way for everything that has come after. According to the theory that poetry resulted from the "spontaneous overflow" of emotions, as Wordsworth wrote in the preface, Wordsworth and Coleridge made it their task to write in the simple language of common people, telling concrete stories of their lives. According to this theory, poetry originated in "emotion recollected in a state of tranquility"; the poet then surrendered to the emotion, so that the tranquility dissolved, and the emotion remained in the poem. This explicit emphasis on feeling, simplicity, and the pleasure of beauty over rhetoric, ornament, and formality changed the course of English poetry, replacing the elaborate classical forms of Pope and Dryden with a new Romantic sensibility. Wordsworth's most important legacy, besides his lovely, timeless poems, is his launching of the Romantic era, opening the gates for later writers such as [John Keats](#), [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#), and Lord Byron in England, and Emerson and Thoreau in America.



Following the success of *Lyrical Ballads* and his subsequent poem *The Prelude*, a massive autobiography in verse form, Wordsworth moved to the stately house at Rydal Mount where he lived, with Dorothy, his wife Mary, and his children, until his death in 1850. Wordsworth became the dominant force in English poetry while still quite a young man, and he lived to be quite old; his later years were marked by an increasing aristocratic temperament and a general alienation from the younger Romantics whose work he had inspired. Byron—the only important poet to become more popular than Wordsworth during Wordsworth’s lifetime—in particular saw him as a kind of sell-out, writing in his sardonic preface to *Don Juan* that the once-liberal Wordsworth had “turned out a Tory” at last. The last decades of Wordsworth’s life, however, were spent as Poet Laureate of England, and until his death he was widely considered the most important author in England.

Wordsworth’s monumental poetic legacy rests on a large number of important poems, varying in length and weight from the short, simple lyrics of the 1790s to the vast expanses of *The Prelude*, thirteen books long in its 1808 edition. But the themes that run through Wordsworth’s poetry, and the language and imagery he uses to embody those themes, remain remarkably consistent throughout the Wordsworth canon, adhering largely to the tenets Wordsworth set out for himself in the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Here, Wordsworth argues that poetry should be written in the natural language of common speech, rather than in the lofty and elaborate dictions that were then considered “poetic.” He argues that poetry should offer access to the emotions contained in memory. And he argues that the first principle of poetry should be pleasure, that the chief duty of poetry is to provide pleasure through a rhythmic and beautiful expression of feeling—for all human sympathy, he claims, is based on a subtle pleasure principle that is “the naked and native dignity of man.”

Recovering “the naked and native dignity of man” makes up a significant part of Wordsworth’s poetic project, and he follows his own advice from the 1802 preface. Wordsworth’s style remains plain-spoken and easy to understand even today, though the rhythms and idioms of common English have changed from those of the early nineteenth century. Many of Wordsworth’s poems (including masterpieces such as “Tintern Abbey” and the “Intimations of Immortality” ode) deal with the subjects of childhood and the memory of childhood in the mind of the adult in particular, childhood’s lost connection with nature, which can be preserved only in memory. Wordsworth’s images and metaphors mix natural scenery, religious symbolism (as in the sonnet “It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,” in which the evening is described as being “quiet as a nun”), and the relics of the poet’s rustic childhood—cottages, hedgerows, orchards, and other places where humanity intersects gently and easily with nature.

Wordsworth’s poems initiated the Romantic era by emphasizing feeling, instinct, and pleasure above formality and mannerism. More than any poet before him, Wordsworth gave expression to inchoate human emotion; his lyric “Strange fits of passion have I known,” in which the speaker describes an inexplicable fantasy he once had that his lover was dead, could not have been written by any previous poet. Curiously for a poet whose work points so directly toward the future, many of Wordsworth’s important works are preoccupied with the lost glory of the past—not only of the lost dreams of childhood but also of the historical past, as in the powerful sonnet “London, 1802,” in which the speaker exhorts the spirit of the centuries-dead poet John Milton to teach the modern world a better way to live.

Themes

The Beneficial Influence of Nature

Throughout Wordsworth’s work, nature provides the ultimate good influence on the human mind. All manifestations of the natural world—from the highest mountain to the simplest flower—elicit noble, elevated thoughts and passionate emotions in the people who observe these manifestations.



Wordsworth repeatedly emphasizes the importance of nature to an individual's intellectual and spiritual development. A good relationship with nature helps individuals connect to both the spiritual and the social worlds. As Wordsworth explains in *The Prelude*, a love of nature can lead to a love of humankind. In such poems as "The World Is Too Much with Us" (1807) and "London, 1802" (1807) people become selfish and immoral when they distance themselves from nature by living in cities. Humanity's innate empathy and nobility of spirit becomes corrupted by artificial social conventions as well as by the squalor of city life. In contrast, people who spend a lot of time in nature, such as laborers and farmers, retain the purity and nobility of their souls.

The Power of the Human Mind

Wordsworth praised the power of the human mind. Using memory and imagination, individuals could overcome difficulty and pain. For instance, the **speaker** in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798) relieves his loneliness with memories of nature, while the leech gatherer in "Resolution and Independence" (1807) perseveres cheerfully in the face of poverty by the exertion of his own will. The transformative powers of the mind are available to all, regardless of an individual's class or background. This democratic view emphasizes individuality and uniqueness. Throughout his work, Wordsworth showed strong support for the political, religious, and artistic rights of the individual, including the power of his or her mind. In the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explained the relationship between the mind and poetry. Poetry is "emotion recollected in tranquility"—that is, the mind transforms the raw emotion of experience into poetry capable of giving pleasure. Later poems, such as "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807), imagine nature as the source of the inspiring material that nourishes the active, creative mind.

The Splendor of Childhood

In Wordsworth's poetry, childhood is a magical, magnificent time of innocence. Children form an intense bond with nature, so much so that they appear to be a part of the natural world, rather than a part of the human, social world. Their relationship to nature is passionate and extreme: children feel joy at seeing a rainbow but great terror at seeing desolation or decay. In 1799, Wordsworth wrote several poems about a girl named Lucy who died at a young age. These poems, including "She dwelt among the untrodden ways" (1800) and "Strange fits of passion have I known" (1800), praise her beauty and lament her untimely death. In death, Lucy retains the innocence and splendor of childhood, unlike the children who grow up, lose their connection to nature, and lead unfulfilling lives. The speaker in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" believes that children delight in nature because they have access to a divine, immortal world. As children age and reach maturity, they lose this connection but gain an ability to feel emotions, both good and bad. Through the power of the human mind, particularly memory, adults can recollect the devoted connection to nature of their youth.

Motifs

Wandering and Wanderers

The speakers of Wordsworth's poems are inveterate wanderers: they roam solitarily, they travel over the moors, they take private walks through the highlands of Scotland. Active wandering allows the characters to experience and participate in the vastness and beauty of the natural world. Moving from place to place also allows the wanderer to make discoveries about himself. In "I travelled among unknown men" (1807), the speaker discovers his patriotism only after he has traveled far from England. While wandering, speakers uncover the visionary powers of the mind and understand the influence of nature, as in "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (1807). The speaker of this poem takes comfort in a walk he once took after he has returned to the grit and desolation of city life. Recollecting his wanderings allows him to transcend his present circumstances. Wordsworth's poetry itself often wanders, roaming



from one subject or experience to another, as in *The Prelude*. In this long poem, the speaker moves from idea to idea through digressions and distractions that mimic the natural progression of thought within the mind.

Memory

Memory allows Wordsworth's speakers to overcome the harshness of the contemporary world. Recollecting their childhoods gives adults a chance to reconnect with the visionary power and intense relationship they had with nature as children. In turn, these memories encourage adults to re-cultivate as close a relationship with nature as possible as an antidote to sadness, loneliness, and despair. The act of remembering also allows the poet to write: Wordsworth argued in the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry sprang from the calm remembrance of passionate emotional experiences. Poems cannot be composed at the moment when emotion is first experienced. Instead, the initial emotion must be combined with other thoughts and feelings from the poet's past experiences using memory and imagination. The poem produced by this time-consuming process will allow the poet to convey the essence of his emotional memory to his readers and will permit the readers to remember similar emotional experiences of their own.

Vision and Sight

Throughout his poems, Wordsworth fixates on vision and sight as the vehicles through which individuals are transformed. As speakers move through the world, they see visions of great natural loveliness, which they capture in their memories. Later, in moments of darkness, the speakers recollect these visions, as in "I wandered lonely as a cloud." Here, the speaker daydreams of former jaunts through nature, which "flash upon that inward eye / which is the bliss of solitude" (21–22). The power of sight captured by our mind's eye enables us to find comfort even in our darkest, loneliest moments. Elsewhere, Wordsworth describes the connection between seeing and experiencing emotion, as in "My heart leaps up" (1807), in which the speaker feels joy as a result of spying a rainbow across the sky. Detailed images of natural beauty abound in Wordsworth's poems, including descriptions of daffodils and clouds, which focus on what can be seen, rather than touched, heard, or felt. In Book Fourteenth of *The Prelude*, climbing to the top of a mountain in Wales allows the speaker to have a prophetic vision of the workings of the mind as it thinks, reasons, and feels.

Symbols

Light

Light often symbolizes truth and knowledge. In "The Tables Turned" (1798), Wordsworth contrasts the barren light of reason available in books with the "sweet" (11) and "freshening" (6) light of the knowledge nature brings. Sunlight literally helps people see, and sunlight also helps speakers and characters begin to glimpse the wonders of the world. In "Expostulation and Reply" (1798), the presence of light, or knowledge, within an individual prevents dullness and helps the individual to see, or experience. Generally, the light in Wordsworth's poems represents immortal truths that can't be entirely grasped by human reason. In "Ode: Imitations of Immortality," the speaker remembers looking at a meadow as a child and imagining it gleaming in "celestial light" (4). As the speaker grows and matures, the light of his youth fades into the "light of common day" (78) of adulthood. But the speaker also imagines his remembrances of the past as a kind of light, which illuminate his soul and give him the strength to live.

The Leech Gatherer

In "Resolution and Independence," the ancient leech gatherer who spends his days wandering the moors looking for leeches represents the strong-minded poet who perseveres in the face of poverty, obscurity, and solitude. As the poem begins, a wanderer travels along a moor, feeling elated and taking great pleasure in the sights of nature around him but also remembering that despair is the twin of happiness. Eventually he comes upon an old man looking for leeches, even though the work is dangerous and the leeches have become increasingly hard to find. As the speaker chats with the old man, he realizes the similarities between leech gathering and writing poetry. Like a leech gatherer, a poet continues to search his or her mind and the landscape of the natural world for poems, even though such intense emotions can damage one's psyche, the work pays poorly and poverty is dangerous to one's health, and inspiration sometimes seems increasingly hard to find. The speaker resolves to think of the leech gatherer whenever his enthusiasm for poetry or belief in himself begins to wane.

