



**William Wordsworth:  
Poems selected by  
Seamus Heaney**

Teaching notes prepared  
by Marion White



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION  
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



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Edited by Faye Crossman

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## Introduction

Many of Wordsworth's ideas and values, in the poems in Seamus Heaney's selection, may strike a chord with our student readers. The poems are concerned with themes such as: our relationship with Nature; the significance of childhood experiences; the connection between clear thinking and nourishment of one's soul in solitude and silence; the effects of materialism and industrial change; the pros and cons of political protest and revolutionary activism; and the problem of social inequality. Wordsworth was young when he went to France, became enthused by the French Revolution, fathered a child whom he did not meet until she was nine, and returned to England upon the outbreak of war. It was in these early years that he wrote his best poetry, much of it considered radical because he wrote in a language that ordinary people could understand. He also had radical political ideas in these early years, supporting the Revolution, for instance, and opposing social inequality and slavery. Most radically, he viewed natural landscapes as emblematic of the mind of God, and as central to the wellbeing of humans.

Wordsworth was born in Cocker-mouth, at the northern edge of England's Lake District, in 1770. The second of five children, William's eldest brother Richard became a lawyer, his younger brother John later went into the merchant navy and died in a shipwreck in 1805, and Christopher went into the church and later became Master of Trinity College Cambridge. His sister Dorothy—whose company, conversations and writing later became so significant in William's productive decade 1797-1808 (and who remained living with William and his family for the rest of her life)—was the third child. The children

lived with different relatives after their mother's death in 1778, the boys attending grammar school in Hawkshead, a small village in the Lake District. Their lawyer father's death in 1783 added to their financial difficulties, but by 1787 William was at St John's College Cambridge, gaining his BA in 1791. He went to France on a walking tour in 1790, and again in 1791-92. There he fathered, with Annette Vallon, a daughter, Caroline, a fact which was kept secret in England for about a century. Wordsworth was enthused by the ideals of the French Revolution, but he became disillusioned when it degenerated into the Terror. The outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1793 ensured that he could not return to France until the 1802 Treaty of Amiens began a brief period of peace.

Dorothy Wordsworth, having been separated from her brothers after their mother's death and sent to relatives in Yorkshire, was reunited with William following his return from France. A legacy enabled them in 1795 to live first in Dorset, then at Alfoxden in Somerset and then—after spending a year with Coleridge in Germany—at Grasmere in Somerset. Dorothy wrote journals and letters which reveal much about their daily life in the Lake District, detailing many shared incidents that are closely related to William's poems. Wordsworth's friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge is particularly significant—they published the *Lyrical Ballads* together in 1798—and he was also friendly with other notable writers, poets and thinkers of the time. In August 1802, when Wordsworth was about to marry Mary Hutchinson, he went to Calais with Dorothy to settle affairs with Annette Vallon. He married Mary in 1802 and had five children, two of whom died young. Dorothy continued to live with them until her death in 1855, four years before Mary and five years

after her brother. Mary's sister Sara was the object of Coleridge's obsessive affection.

Seamus Heaney's selection consists largely of the poetry considered to be Wordsworth's best, written in the decade 1797 to 1807. Wordsworth repeatedly revised his poetry throughout his life; the version we have of 'The Prelude', for instance, is the early two-part 'Prelude' from 1802. Heaney's selection concludes with what is considered to be the last poem of note, 'Extempore Effusion' written in 1835. Heaney writes in the Introduction that Wordsworth 'was always at his best while struggling to become a whole person', and that his poetry is 'democratic ... visionary ... philosophic ... cathartic [and] masterful'—rather like Heaney's own poetry. Heaney is himself a highly significant poet, who shares with Wordsworth the ability to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. Like Wordsworth, he wrote in his own speaking voice about landscape, the political and the personal, displacement, dispossession, and sense of place; 'Heaney is Ireland, Wordsworth the Lakes' (O'Hagan 2011). Heaney believed in the value of poetry, suggesting that in times of crisis people realise they need more to live than economics: 'If poetry and the arts do anything ... they can fortify your inner life, your inwardness.' (Poetry Foundation). Heaney wrote in tribute to ordinary people and their personal and political struggles, but whereas his context was defined by the complexities, tragedies and traumas of twentieth-century Irish history, Wordsworth's was defined by those of eighteenth-century Europe.

### **Context – Romanticism, history and ideas**

Wordsworth's fame derives not only from his radical use of ordinary human language in his poetry but from the ideas of his time that the poetry reflects. He sits between the Age of Enlightenment and the beginning of the Romantic movement. His poetry reflects Rousseau's ideas about education, nature and freedom, ideas that challenged the traditional religious doctrine of 'original sin', instead viewing the child as innately good and childhood as close to God.

The Scientific Revolution laid the groundwork for two major developments in the eighteenth century: the Age of Enlightenment (its effect on intellectual life) and the Industrial Revolution (its effect on commerce). The rise of science challenged religious belief: when Newton developed a body of laws explaining the physical universe so that God's intervention was no longer needed (and Galileo had shown the Earth is not the centre of the universe), the traditional Christian certainties were undermined.

Previously subservient to monarchy, aristocracy and church, people now began to question and challenge traditional societal values and the old criteria for establishing truth. The eighteenth century saw population increase, industrialisation and the growth of towns and cities. The rise of the bourgeoisie or middle class, whose increasing wealth was based not only on industry and commerce but also on slavery in some of the colonies, supported a great outburst of activity in British economic and social life. Inventors and entrepreneurs such as James Watt underpinned the commercial activity that turned almost everything into a 'market', while the spirit of intellectual inquiry, evident in the new coffee shops, universities, and the Royal Society, stimulated a growth in democratic and humanitarian ideas.

The Industrial Revolution and 'enlightened self-interest'—seen by Adam Smith as the basis of the new science of economics—provided increasingly urbanised employment, but the agricultural revolution led to suffering and/or mass emigration. The 'enclosure' of common land destroyed traditional patterns of farming and caused rural poverty. This process evolved in England over a couple of centuries, but in Scotland, particularly in the border areas, the 'clearances' created mass dispossession more abruptly. People were evicted from land where they had lived for generations.

Napoleonic wars and revolutions were also part of the social and political tumult going on around the young Wordsworth. During the reign of George III (1760-1820), there were uprisings in Ireland and North America, riots in London, and constant rivalry with France and other European countries, sometimes—in the Pacific for instance—because of colonial expansion. Britain fought wars with France 1793-1815, saw the loss of the American colonies in the War of Independence of 1775-1783, and watched nervously as the French Revolution developed from 1789, particularly as it degenerated into insurrection and regicide.

Prior to these revolutions, the intellectuals promoting scientific ways of thinking and religious tolerance were as diverse as Voltaire in France, Benjamin Franklin in America, and Immanuel Kant in Germany. Radical thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft (whose husband William Godwin influenced the young Wordsworth) were prepared to endorse political disruption of the traditional hierarchical authority of monarchy, aristocracy, and church—and of the dominance of men. As these thinkers challenged traditional authority, and as industry and commerce developed, the middle class grew in size, first in

England then throughout western Europe. But it was still a long struggle to end the political, economic, and social stranglehold of the rich and powerful. Wherever industrial wealth became more important, the middle class gained political power and social respectability. The bourgeoisie was able to force important changes, but its members still functioned in a political and social world that discriminated in favour of the few.

The Romantic movement was a reaction to, and rejection of, all this. The Romantics saw landscape and peasant people, 'folk' songs and traditions, as representing a more simple time. They regarded the legends, myths and folk traditions of a people as the wellspring of poetry and art, the spiritual source of cultural vitality, creativity and identity.

The Romantics agreed with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea that feelings are the human essence, that 'our sensibility is ... prior to our reason'. Abstract reason and scientific knowledge, they said, are insufficient guides to knowledge. Reason and science provide only general principles about nature and people, failing to penetrate to 'what really matters', the uniqueness of each person, tree, cloud or lake. Whereas the Enlightenment focused on what people shared in common, the Romantics emphasised human individuality and diversity, and their emphasis on the imagination ran counter to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. They idealised the heroic chivalry and religious faith of the Middle Ages, regarding legends, myths and folk traditions as the wellspring of poetry and art, the spiritual source of cultural vitality, creativity and identity. These ideas, along with the emphasis on the individual, underpin the ways in which the Romantic movement helped shape modern nationalism (Perry et al 2004).

Romanticism found expression in art, music and literature, and the imagination of the individual was to determine the form and content of an artistic creation. The Romantic movement's emphasis on human feeling also found expression in humanitarian movements that fought slavery, child labour, and poverty. Romanticism recognised the way that industrial capitalism subordinates individuals to the requirements of the industrial process. Romantics viewed God as a spiritual force that inspired people and enriched life, and they deplored the decline of Christianity.

## Ways into the text

Read excerpts from the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, considering Wordsworth's friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Students could first listen to, or share, readings of Wordsworth's poems, beginning with narrative poems such as 'The Two-Part Prelude', 'The Ruined Cottage' or 'Michael', and reading initially just for the storyline and the aural experience of the rhythm (five beats in the line, which can sound like four when read aloud). Wordsworth's blank verse in these poems is what he called 'the ordinary language of men', and even two hundred years later it is possible to feel the naturalness of this language, especially in these biographical poems. Interested students could read Coleridge's poems 'Christabel', 'Xanadu' and 'The Ancient Mariner'.

Research people, events and places that are implicitly or explicitly referred to in the poetry:

- excerpts from Dorothy Wordsworth's Alfoxden or Grasmere journals, which record many of the scenes found in her brother's poetry—the daffodils are a well known example;
- Seamus Heaney was a Wordsworth fan. Read his BBC obituary and some of his poems, e.g. 'Digging', 'Personal Helicon', and his Introduction to this collection;
- historical events of Wordsworth's time such as the French Revolution, American War of Independence, and Napoleonic wars 1793-1815;
- Rousseau's ideas about childhood, in *Emile*;
- places and landscapes in Wordsworth's poetry such as the Lakes District, Dove Cottage Grasmere, the Simplon Pass, Tintern Abbey, and rivers Derwent, Yarrow, etc;
- the Romantic movement and the changes it brought to art forms, for instance, in painting (e.g. Turner, Constable, Beaumont) and music;
- other Romantic poets;
- poets who preceded Wordsworth such as John Milton, John Clare, Thomas Gray, Alexander Pope;
- poets known to him: Robert Burns (Scottish farmer poet, 'in joy/ Following his plough, along the mountainside' VII 'Resolution and Independence'), James Hogg (the Ettrick Shepherd), Walter Scott (the mighty Minstrel), Charles Lamb, George Crabbe, Mrs Felicia Hemans;

- Toussaint l'Ouverture;
- young William was politically radical; he supported the abolition of slavery, and the principles of justice for all, liberty and equality under the law. William Godwin, Coleridge, Southey, and the more cautious Wordsworth all opposed the Treasonable Practices Act of 1795, hailed the 'Martyrs of Freedom', and were probably under surveillance as a consequence. Charles James Fox, whose 1806 death is mourned in 'Lines' (p. 137), opposed the passing of the Bill in the parliament.

## Perspective on the text

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Wordsworth's poetry is so significant in the English literary canon that 'different interpretations' have proliferated over the two centuries since he wrote it. He has been viewed as both radical and conservative, politically 'left' and 'right', both for and against ecological issues, republicanism, commercialism, concern for the poor, or established religion. He has been admired for giving dignity to the rural poor, and criticised for ignoring the poor of urban communities. His gender alone has generated a range of alternate readings, especially given the privileged male position that enabled him to live a comfortable lifestyle—with his sister to keep house until he married—and to keep secret the fact of his illegitimate daughter for almost a century.

The *Lyrical Ballads* were viewed as radically democratising poetic language and as representing social and political ideas that challenged the established order. Yet, although his poetry implicitly values Nature as belonging to everyone, Wordsworth himself took readily to individual ownership. One critic queries whether his takeover of the 1800 publication of *Lyrical Ballads*—denying Coleridge both a name on the front cover and publication of his great Gothic poem 'Christabel'—was 'a form of economic domination and materialist ownership, rather than devotion to literary commonality and democratic ideas' (Cox 1994).

To explore the 'implicit and implied values' expressed in 'the world of' this text might be no easy task if one tries to read the endless amount of erudite critical comment that's available. Perhaps a better way to go about meeting these expectations of the VCE English Study Design is to approach the poetry directly, with the assumption that our students can interpret Wordsworth's poetry just as they see it. Students will find in the poems a young poet not unlike themselves, a poet who is fired up about social justice and prepared to throw himself into the fray of

political activism, who is in every sense 'a romantic', and is looking for meaning in the beautiful sights and sounds of the natural environment, and seeking a sense of identity and belonging. We can imagine that if he lived in our time and place, he would be fighting for environmental causes alongside Australian poets John Kinsella or Judith Wright, or perhaps surfing with Tim Winton (who experienced the 'late sixties and early seventies [as] surfing's Romantic era' [2016, p. 132] and is himself a 'natural believer' who 'apprehends a divine element at play in the world').

What will our students make of the divine element in Wordsworth's poetry? His contribution to the re-defining of the Christian God that began with the Enlightenment is seen in his view of human inter-relationship with nature as going beyond the physical and psychological, to a spiritual or religious dimension. His religious ideas move away from the old hierarchical 'chain of being' and the idea that Christ's resurrection is the believer's only guarantee of immortality. The poetry reveals a theist of some sort, although Coleridge said Wordsworth was a 'semi-atheist'. The question for Wordsworth seemed to be 'how can we know God?' and his answer (contrary to the idea that one knows God through 'the Word', the Bible, and the Church) was that one could know God through one's own direct experiences in nature. Wordsworth's views marked him as part of a dissenting culture at the turn of the century that was extremely radical.

These days, social media are constantly making public narrative out of private experiences; self-narrativisation is common. However, for Wordsworth, the unashamedly subjective Prelude was sufficiently controversial that it wasn't published until after his death in 1850. Its ideas about childhood are uncontroversial today: that loving parents provide psychological security for the growing baby, that playing in open spaces develops resilience in the growing child, and that a child can learn to process feelings of joy, fear or grief in interactions with natural surroundings, all seem obvious to us. His idea about the 'natural piety' of the child, and that experiences in childhood form the adult self ('the Child is father to the Man'), show him to be a thinker before his time—Wordsworth's views and values were radically new.

Romanticism—a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment and against physical materialism in general—emphasised the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental. With the benefit of an imagination



nurtured by education, a person can become an idealist, and idealism can lead to political activism. Being politically active—demonstrating against wars, conscription, environmental destruction, or an authoritarian regime—can be traumatic. The suffering of those who protested in Tiananmen Square in 1989, for instance, or Tahrir Square in 2011 is unbearable to think of. Perhaps we see in Wordsworth's poems the effect of putting oneself on the line for ideals and beliefs: with his enthusiasm for overthrowing a corrupt authoritarian regime in France, and for changing the politics in his own country, his feelings would have been understandably intense. Perhaps in the aftermath he went through some kind of depression. Certainly, in her *Alfoxden Journal*, Dorothy describes a man with 'physical nervousness' and 'hypochondriacal characteristics' (Woof 1995).

The poems reveal a poet with a social conscience, one who believes that Nature provides the inspiration for the interior life. He repeatedly returns to the idea of the cycle of life, and expresses both fear and acceptance of death. He looks to Nature for a sense of immortality, although he doesn't move far from the idea, as in all three 'religions of the book', that the earth is infused with, or created by, something beyond the material. Wordsworth was on the side of the ordinary person, and against the authoritarian regimes in power. The theological and social ideas in the poems imply values such as concern for the poor and support for equality and social justice. Yet also valued is the centrality of the individual self—and in particular, the thoughts of the poet-philosopher whose ideas are generated from 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' (p. viii), emotions that arose from feelings experienced by the individual poet-thinker in natural landscapes.

Contemporary readers may see the spiritual-religious views in the poems as a more humanist or environmentalist form of Christianity, or perhaps as resistance to materialism and to domineering socio-political structures. Or perhaps they may see in the poems a foreshadowing of the search for meaning in our own time of 'climate emergency', of economic and political division, of technological surveillance capitalism, and of self-interested identity politics.

Contemporary readers might also ask: what if natural landscapes are destroyed, native flora and fauna extinct, air and water poisoned, the very planet under threat? How then are we to experience sublime feelings while rambling in bushland, or to have uplifting 'emotions recollected in tranquility'? The modern reader might notice the general absence of natural fauna in the poems, or the silenced presence

of the poet's female amanuensis—in 'Stepping Westward' (p. 132) and 'The Solitary Reaper' (p. 133) for instance. (Dorothy wrote about these poems from their shared 1803 tour of Scotland in her *Recollections*, where 'their creative responses to the Scottish tour can be considered side by side' [Newlyn 2013], but it's William who gets all the credit.)

Today's student readers will find plenty of 'explicit and implied ideas and values' to 'identify and analyse' (VCE English Study Design) in Heaney's selection of William Wordsworth's poetry. They may also find in these ideas and values much to enjoy.

## Issues and themes

Wordsworth's views and values include a quasi-religious belief in the mind and spirit of Nature, and a sense of the interdependence of humans with the natural environment. The poems show empathy and concern for other people, awareness of the self and of one's psychological, spiritual and intellectual needs and growth, and acceptance of the stages of life. The poet reveals his feelings about political protest: it was both stimulating and difficult. And the poems reveal a poet who both sees the need for social change, but also settles for a comfortable lifestyle.

The fragments that open the collection introduce the idea that between humans and our so-called 'inanimate' natural environment a mystical communion may be entered into—and, further, that humans shall 'never (feel) for each other' until we not only are at one with nature, but also recognise that 'In all forms of things/ There is a mind' (p. 5). This radical idea could mean that God made all things and is in all things, or it could mean that humans need to treat the features of our natural environment as animate—indeed, that to treat nature as 'inanimate' and expendable is not in our own interest.

As with most of the poems in Heaney's selection, we see in 'A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags' (p. 51) a number of Wordsworth's ideas, views and values: the importance of connection with nature; empathy for his fellow man; and awareness of his own self as actor and agent in the world. With sister and friend, he is strolling along the shore of Grasmere Lake observing 'Such objects as the waves had tossed ashore', pausing occasionally either to pluck—or if particularly beautiful, to observe—a flower, fern or water weed. The 'invisible breeze' that causes a tuft of dandelion seed or thistle's beard to skim on the surface of the water is said by the poet to be 'its moving soul'. The poem thus seems initially to be

about nature's animating spirit, but then in the fourth section it turns to focus on people. The attention of the three ramblers is drawn by the 'busy mirth' of reapers, so that when they see 'a Man' fishing alone, they judge him to be too lazy to join in the harvest. However, when upon closer inspection they see how thin and weak the man is, they reproach themselves with the admonition to 'temper all our thoughts with charity'. The poet's sense of class inequality and of social justice is revealed in his self-reproach: prompted to empathetic thought by his enjoyment of the 'lovely images' of the 'sweet morn' (p. 52), he is aware of the contrast between his own comfortable circumstances and those of people less fortunate than himself, and this thought brings him back to the agency and development of the self.

## Nature – nurturing human wellbeing

For Wordsworth, the sublime experience of connecting with nature—and of recollecting moments of bliss and insight—generates clear thinking and uplifts the soul. In the poems, natural landscapes are common property available to all for personal improvement and maintenance of wellbeing. Humanity interconnected with nature is the opposite of human exploitation and greed. Many of the poems declare the life-sustaining qualities of Nature, as against the life-denying human tendencies to be destructive, materialistic, selfish, greedy, domineering or thoughtless:

To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man. (p. 29).

'To My Sister' (p. 23) is almost a Romantic poet's manifesto: he proposes a day of idle rambling, claiming that time devoted to 'feeling' on this Spring day will provide a sense of the inter-relatedness of earth and people ('earth to man ... man to earth') and that allowing themselves to 'drink' in the spirit of their natural surrounds will fortify their minds in a better way than would scientific or logical thinking ('reason'). The poet's picturesque way of viewing nature is transformed into a quasi-religious transcendentalism, bringing a fresh view of the inter-relatedness of humans with the natural world. Not only is the human mind relating with the mind or spirit of nature, but nature is also emblematic of the mind of God.

In 'The Two-Part Prelude', Nature is seen both as a sort of foster-parent, and also a semi-religious spiritual entity. The subject, the boy, becomes in a sense unified with the objects of nature. And in 'The Simpon Pass' (which later became part of 'The

Prelude'), after fourteen lines of realistic description of what the hikers saw and heard there, the six-line philosophic interpretation suggests that all this is 'like workings of one mind', a sort of Platonic vision. These features of nature 'are the types and symbols of eternity/ Of first, and last, and midst, and without end' (p. 129).

Other poems about the idea of a mind and spirit in nature which feeds our human thought, emotion, and imagination are:

- 'The Tables Turned', p. 32, 'Let Nature be your Teacher ... bring with you a heart/ That watches and receives.'
- 'Tintern Abbey', p. 34, 'These beauteous forms ... I have owed to them ... sensations sweet'
- 'Expostulation and Reply', p. 30, 'we can feed this mind of ours/ In a wise passiveness.'
- 'Nutting', p. 44, 'there is a spirit in the woods.'
- 'The Two-Part Prelude', p. 81 '... when I first began/ To love the woods and fields.'
- 'To The Cuckoo', p. 96, 'Thou bringest unto me a tale/ Of visionary hours.' (The cuckoo, 'a voice, a mystery' takes the poet back to childhood 'that golden time again' where he finds poetic inspiration.)
- 'My heart leaps up when I behold', p. 98.
- 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free', p. 118.

Nature is also emblematic of life's circularities.

Observing the cycles of life and the circular processes of memory and recollection, the poet sees unity in all things. Subject and object become one. In 'There Was a Boy', for instance, the poet establishes the mystical connection between the Boy and the cliffs, islands, lake, hills; they 'knew him well' (p. 39). The Boy hoots to the owls, the voice of mountain torrents enters his heart, the visible scene enters his mind, and now the poet stands 'looking at the grave in which he lies'. The final stanza's first line 'This boy was taken from his mates, and died', comes as a bit of a shock, but the reader understands the Biblical idea of circularity—dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Yet, more than this, the poem implies a unity of the dead child with the earth and lake, his memories of its imagery and sounds now 'received/ Into the bosom of the steady lake'.

The mystical, melancholy, visionary poem 'Lucy Gray; or, Solitude' (p. 45) suggests similar ideas:

— Yet some maintain that to this day  
She is a living child; ...  
... And sings a solitary song  
That whistles in the wind. (pp. 46-47).

The human figure here seems to evolve out of, and pass back into, the landscape, while the spiritualising of the character 'Lucy' seeks to exalt imagination rather than realism. She's less a little girl than a spiritual, imaginative character.

On the other hand, the poet also sees humans as intruders, marauders and destroyers of nature. Wordsworth implies that industrialisation is a blight on the environment when he observes 'wreaths of smoke' near Tintern Abbey (p. 34), or when he notes the unusually 'smokeless air' in 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' (p. 116). In 'Nutting' (p. 43), he self-deprecatingly depicts himself as 'forcing [his] way' in a 'virgin scene' to mercilessly ravage 'both branch and bough' in order to get what he wants from the hazel-tree. The strong imagery, suggesting a human dominance and even rape of nature, is quite unsettling. The poet ends by invoking the need for a 'gentle hand ... for there is a spirit in the woods' (p. 44). In this final tercet, we are brought back from shame and degradation to the poet's initial 'wise restraint' and blessings of 'sudden happiness beyond all hope' (p. 43)—and in the gentle 'Touch', to a renewed reverence for nature.

### For discussion

- Wordsworth portrays Nature sometimes as beautiful or nurturing, and also as threatening. Find examples of both views. In these examples, are natural features shown objectively as beautiful or terrifying, or are the notions of beauty and terror actually about the poet's imagination?
- The idea of Nature as both nurturing and threatening is a familiar idea for Australians. We may have 'golden soil' and 'nature's gifts', but we also have fire, flood, drought, and poisonous creatures. To what extent are Wordsworth's ideas about nature universally relevant?
- Do the poems suggest a belief in: pantheism (that God is identifiable with the forces of nature); animism (attributing a living soul to natural phenomena); or a theistic belief based on Christianity?
- Does the wilful destruction of nature as portrayed in 'Nutting' bear any resemblance to the ways in which people today destroy forests or bushland? Does tourism often destroy the very landscapes that tourists go to see?
- Wordsworth's poems imply that common ownership of land is good, much as Rousseau viewed private ownership as a type of fraud. Do you think it is important to preserve National Parks?

## The Self – individuality, personal growth, memory

Wordsworth's poetry resembles life writing—his subject is often himself. It is this subjectivity that makes 'The Two-Part Prelude', an autobiographical account of the poet's early life, easy to read. Yet it is not just an exploration of the self, but of the development of the poetic mind, the mind of a philosopher, a thinker—not merely a writer, but a writer dedicated to distilling important ideas in the succinct form of poetry. The opening line 'Was it for this...?' draws the reader's attention to the **purpose** of the poet's childhood.

The purpose of a childhood lived in connection with nature—in which 'every common sight' appears 'clothed in celestial light' (p. 99)—is to prepare the adult, not just for surviving the struggles and superficialities of later life, but for being able to face suffering and death with faith, imagination, and a steady mind:

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind.  
(pp. 104-105).

The poet expresses, in 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', despair at the way the spontaneity and joy of the child succumbs to the pressures of life, the 'dialogues of business, love, or strife'. He bemoans the fact that the sufferings and demands of adulthood may see a person 'forget the glories he hath known' and become merely an 'imitation' (p. 102), but he nevertheless expresses hope that the Child, the 'best Philosopher ... Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!' is still present in the adult, like the embers of a fire:

O joy! That in our embers  
Is something that doth live, (p. 103).

'*The Child is Father of the Man*'. We who live in post-Freud generations take for granted the idea that childhood experiences are a psychological and emotional foundation of the adult self. The child who can play safely in a natural and stimulating environment, and who has 'his mother's kisses' and 'light upon him from his father's eyes' (p. 102), will most likely grow up to be a stable and productive adult. But in Wordsworth's time this emphasis on the

individual self, and on the significance of childhood experiences, was still a fairly new idea. Children were considered merely small adults, mouths to feed, or a potential source of labour. Wordsworth's idea that children are born naturally good follows on from philosophers such as Rousseau and Locke, and from the Renaissance idea that the individual is a soul made 'in the image of God'. The child addressed in 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free' is said to be divine, to be at all times with God: 'Dear child! Dear Girl! – thy nature is ... divine ... Thou liest in Abraham's bosom' (p. 118). Whether the child is the poet's daughter Caroline or the imaginary Lucy, the point is that the poet views childhood as a transcendent state, and the child as worthwhile because she is close to God.

In the 'Ode', Wordsworth adds that 'The Youth ... is Nature's Priest' (p. 101); the young person, in his/her interaction with Nature, is taught by imagination and experience to think deeply ('thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'), and thus to 'behold the light' of a priestly calling, a vocation.

The individual portrayed in 'The Two-Part Prelude' grows and develops through experience and contemplation fostered in natural environments. 'I was taught to feel ... The self-sufficing power of solitude', the poet claims (p. 83), and he suggests that even though we may lose the natural piety of childhood, we can retain, through remembered moments of insight, a selfless consciousness of 'some other being' (p. 82). 'The Two-Part Prelude' describes life's journey in physical terms, but the main events in that autobiographical poem are internal—subjective, psychologically foundational, intensely imaginative and emotional:

Ah, not in vain ye beings of the hills, ...  
... did ye love to intertwine  
The passions that build up our human soul  
... with high objects, ...  
With life and Nature, ... until we recognise  
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart. (pp. 71-72).

As well as these emotionally positive views of personal experience, the poet is equally familiar with the depths of anxiety and depression. In 'Written in London, September, 1802' for instance, he bemoans to his friend Coleridge the loss of everything that seemed worthwhile to him: 'O Friend! ... No grandeur now in nature of in book/ Delights us' (p. 121). The poet here is distressed and in need of comfort. In 'Tintern Abbey' we see what comforts him: 'in hours of weariness' he owes 'sensations sweet' to the 'beauteous forms' he contemplates, and these sweet feelings are:

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And [pass] even into [his] purer mind,  
With tranquil restoration ... (p. 34).

Thus, contemplation of nature is viewed as a possible way to deal with what in our time would be referred to as mental health issues. Another way of suggesting this idea can be seen in 'My heart leaps up when I behold/ A rainbow in the sky' (p. 98). The rainbow represents God's covenant with Man; the poet, in contemplating the cycle of life from childhood to old age, celebrates the 'natural piety' of 'the Child', a state which sustains the individual throughout life with positive thoughts, 'the bond of union betwixt life and joy' (p. 79).

This brings us back to the significance of the loving, nurturing parent in developing the independent self: 'blest the babe ... who ... / Doth gather passion from his mother's eye' (p. 88). The poet portrays children as born in a state of natural and mystical innocence:

trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (p. 101).

In 'The Prelude's' biographical story, the child subject grows up with Nature as a foster-parent. As he grows, the poet experiences in natural environments a full range of feelings: joy and fear, pain and pleasure, anxiety and calm. Under Nature's care and guidance, he learns from all life's experiences. He hears 'low breathings' after he has been trapping woodcocks; a huge cliff '[u]preared its head' and strode after him when he was rowing on the lake in the dark; imagined forms give him nightmares at night (p. 71). The growth of the self continues through experiences such as seeing a dead man rise from the lake, and the death of parents; but 'power' (p. 77) is implanted in his mind by the scenes he recollects. He is delighted by youthful experiences such as skating and swimming, he experiences 'the calm/ Which Nature breathes' (p. 68), and his memories bring back for him 'vulgar joy' and 'giddy bliss', emotions which 'work along the blood' like 'the flashing of a shield' (p. 79).

Other poems in which we find ideas about emotions, personal growth, or the stages of life:

- a poem that contemplates age, youth and the passage of time is 'The Small Celandine' (p. 125);
- the elegy 'Extempore Effusion' laments the deaths of poets Wordsworth himself knew (p. 139);
- poems about personal suffering and grief are 'Ode' (p. 99) and 'Elegiac Stanzas' (p. 130);
- 'To My Sister' (p. 23) is about feelings associated with what we might today call 'looking after oneself';

- 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' (p. 126) portrays the significance of remembering landscape scenes, and the emotions associated with the memory;
- the idea that personal growth may result from experiences of extreme distress, despair or depression is portrayed in 'Elegaic Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle', written in 1805 after the death of Wordsworth's brother John; the poet observes that 'A deep distress hath humanized my Soul' (p. 131).

### For discussion

- Which feelings do the poems more often express: fear, awe, joy, bliss, grief, acceptance, or something else?
- In the poems, what is the role of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'?

### Others – charity, social change and loss

As well as exploring the subjective experience of the Self and the interdependence of all living things, the Romantic sensibility is characterised by attentiveness to children, affection for family, friends and neighbours, and a desire to understand the Other.

When Wordsworth steps, as it were, into the shoes of others—particularly of poor rural people—we see a caring concern for social justice issues. Poems such as 'The Ruined Cottage', 'Michael: A Pastoral' and 'Resolution and Independence' portray the hardships inflicted on the poor by war, social change and industrialisation. The poet seems to admire the stoic, authentic and dignified ways in which these rural characters endure such hardships. This view is also evident in 'A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags'. Dorothy, Coleridge and the poet, strolling along the shore of Grasmere Lake observing the features of nature, make a rash judgment about a peasant who is fishing instead of helping with the harvest; but when they observe that he is 'Too weak to labour in the harvest field' and that:

The Man was using his best skill to gain  
A pittance from the dead unfeeling lake  
That knew not of his wants. (p. 52),

they resolved thereafter to 'temper all [their] thoughts with charity'. (p. 53).

Similarly, there is sympathy for Margaret, whose life is ruined before her cottage is. The poet and the wanderer imply that the society is responsible for her ruin: after her husband, like so many other 'artisans', had been 'turned away' from his 'daily labour' (p. 11) and then had gone off to war, 'poverty and grief/ Were now come nearer to her' (p. 19). The poet, in telling

the story, suggests that the landscape has physical memory, not only of this very personal poverty and grief, but also of the wider 'ruin' of an earlier (perhaps idealised) pastoral life.

Readers might perceive nostalgia in the poet's portrayal of these people, or perhaps these poems provide foresight of the factors leading to environmental ruin, social inequality, and poverty. Certainly the poet seems to lament in 'Lines Written in Early Spring' (p. 29) the ways in which humans treat each other. He observes joy and pleasure in the flowers, birds and breezes, but his heart and mind are 'grieved ... to think/ What man has made of man' (p. 29).

A sense of loss permeates many of the poems—loss both social and personal. The Lucy poems—'A slumber did my spirit steal', 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways', and 'Strange fits of passion have I known'—all lament the loss of a loved one. As Wordsworth wrote them during the cold winter spent in Germany in 1797-1798, these poems could reflect his yearning for the daughter in France. Or they could mourn the loss of a childlike sensibility within an exploitative society. Or their mournful tone could reflect a more mystical or metaphorical idea: Lucy could be Nature itself, and the poet's grief a representation of his distress at the severing of the connection between nature and humanity. In this reading, Lucy's death could represent a larger disjunction or destruction. A more mystical reading, then, of the ending to 'Lucy Gray; or, Solitude' could be that the natural environment is 'the living child' and we readers should 'see' her more properly, to ensure that she no longer has to 'sing a solitary song/ That whistles in the wind' (p. 47). We should re-connect with her.

The gothic narrative 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill: A True Story' also seems mystical—or mythical. In gothic fiction, the characters find themselves in some frightening experience or place because of some mysterious or supernatural element. But this story seems to be a moral tale: Goody Blake steals wood from Harry's hedge, but Harry punishes a person who is poor and freezing cold. Both characters do something wrong, but one is more reprehensible than the other. There could be even more going on in this story; some see in the poem an implied critique of society, and of the Church which in England at the time was responsible for the needs of the poor. The community here seems to have ignored the old woman's hardship, and the poem in its gothic weirdness implies an urgent need for social change.

### For discussion

- Do the poems value and give significance to the rural poor, or is the view of them condescending and patronising?
- Does it matter that the poet shows no sympathy for the masses of people who, through the same processes of social change, became the urban poor?

### Society – politics, protest, reform

Most of the poems in this collection were written in the 1790s and early 1800s, a politically turbulent time. Intellectuals and artists like the young Wordsworth hailed the French Revolution as a challenge to the existing order. It would have been exciting for young William to carry a Jacobin flag in protest against a decadent aristocratic society. However, he fled from the Jacobin Reign of Terror. In Britain, Prime Minister William Pitt sought to restrict political protest with measures to restrict political meetings, ban allegedly treasonable publications, and use spies to inform on those considered radical (White 2009). Wordsworth withheld publication of one of his poems at this time because it may have resulted in a prosecution for seditious libel. So although he had considered poetry as a medium for active intervention in the nation's political life, he was already turning from a focus on society and politics to a more generalised poetry about people and nature. The rise of the dictatorial Bonaparte saw England and France at war, and William unable to return to France until 1802. He was shocked then at the numbers of British people who flocked to France when Napoleon declared himself First Consul for life—Wordsworth went across the Channel for personal reasons, but many went to cheer the rise of an autocrat.

The poems critique commercial expansion and are sympathetic to the rural poor, although they seem silent about the urban masses whose lives were debased by commercialism. The poems condemn materialism, and endorse 'plain living and high thinking', but the poet's comfortable life in the quiet of the Lakes District was possible for him only because of his own wealth. Nevertheless, he does speak up against the exploitations of capitalism, even if we see his yearnings for a purer and more innocent age as impractical, and his earlier revolutionary idea of 'liberty' as having become merely a synonym for the 'solitude' of the comfortable middle classes. The poems do claim that because of exploitation and greed ('rapine and avarice'), British people had lost

their 'fearful innocence', 'pure religion' and peace, and had desecrated their environment. Condemnation of industrialisation and greed echoes the poet's belief that the social evils of his day were caused by Britain's development of the material at the expense of the spiritual. Although we might see the poet change—from viewing nature as the force of freedom, to equating nature with individual escapism, paternalistic charity and middle-class indulgence—we nevertheless see in the poetry that energy of mind and spirit which enables people of every time, every age, to fight for social and political change.

The sonnet 'To Toussaint l'Ouverture' indicates the poet's view that freedom is a state of nature (hence his anti-slavery views), while a number of the poems refer to political issues. Poems that express political ideas, and themes of ethics, social justice, and equality:

- '1801' (p. 113)—the poet grieves for 'Buonaparté' because he lacks the quality of good governing, something that requires a female sensibility rather than the masculinity of war-mongering;
- 'The world is too much with us' (p. 114)—the poet condemns materialism: 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers ... We have given our hearts away';
- 'Composed near Calais' (p. 117)—the poet, now dismissive of the republican greeting 'Good morrow, Citizen!' and believing he'd been 'too credulous' about the revolution, feels exposed to danger in France but refuses to despair;
- 'To Toussaint l'Ouverture' (p. 119)—the former slave, who as a leader in Haiti had preached reconciliation but was imprisoned by the French;
- 'London, 1802' (p. 120)—the poet wishes Milton was still alive (Wordsworth wanted to emulate Milton by devoting his 'pen to the Radical cause');
- 'Written in London, September, 1802' (p. 121)—the poet despairs the 'idolatry' of greed and exploitation;
- 'French Revolution As It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement' (p. 127)—the poet expresses the joy of youthful political involvement and enthusiasm: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/ But to be young was very heaven!'
- 'Thought of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland' (p. 134);
- 'Lines' (p. 137).

## For discussion

- Considering the views expressed in all the poems in this collection, which strike you as most significant—those about nature and the environment, about disadvantaged people, about social and political change, or about the emotions and experiences of the individual self?
- Is the concept of childhood in the poems merely a product of adult nostalgia and memory?
- What is the role of memory, as constructed in these poems?

## Language and style

Wordsworth's poetry was considered radical when he published the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. His aim, stated in the Preface, was to use the 'real language' of ordinary people, to invite middle and lower class people to read and enjoy poetry—in other words, to democratise poetry. Thus we can read Wordsworth's blank verse as a political act, just as we read the ordinary human characters and incidents portrayed in his poetry as a manifestation of his social and political concerns. Poetic form and function really mattered to Wordsworth; he believed that poetry serves not only its own but future generations: – *'if something from our hands have power/ To ... serve the future hour'* (p. 138).

In his Preface, Wordsworth rejects the 'gaudiness and inane phraseology' of earlier poetry, stating that in his poems he chooses 'incidents and situations from common life'. But he also believes that 'ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way' and he sees poetry as a 'philosophical language' in which the poet can express ideas. Thus 'each [poem] has a worthy purpose'. He rejects 'poetic diction', the high-flown language devices previously chosen by poets, preferring to narrow the difference between poetry and prose—but he notes that rhythm (meter) is an important aspect of language. His is a straightforward style of poetry with remarkably harmonious sounds, and natural rhythms.

Read aloud Wordsworth's blank verse. Feel how natural is the rhythm of his language, and how euphonic are the language choices.

Hear the assonance and consonance in his vocabulary choices, the internal rhymes or half-rhymes or repetitions. In 'Tintern Abbey', for instance,

rhymes are located within lines; the half-rhyme or consonantal rhyme 'winters/waters' establishes the setting of the poem, while the full rhyme 'steep/ (scene)/deep' introduces the poem's argument. The argument in the second section is carried towards the climactic final line in two sentences, each of about fourteen lines, with harmony in the language created by repetitions and by half-rhymes such as: 'me/eye', 'din/them', 'sweet/heart' or 'blessed/ gently/ breath' and 'mood/blood' (pp. 34-35). Hear the onomatopoeia, the sound of skates on ice, in these lines in 'The Two-Part Prelude':

... All shod with steel  
We hissed along the polished ice in games  
Confederate, imitative of the chace (p. 72).

Read poems such as 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'Resolution and Independence': at a glance, the rhythm may look to be five feet, pentameter—but as you read, the natural language may settle to four feet, tetrameter. When reading 'Yarrow Unvisited'—which Wordsworth wrote to please his friend Walter Scott, whose Yarrow ballads it echoes, as they had been there together in 1803—it's easy to slip into a Scottish accent and rhythm. The sounds and rhythms in Wordsworth's language masterfully draw us in.

Observe how he uses verbs in 'Simplon Pass' to give agency to the natural features of a stunning landscape in the alps between Italy and Switzerland: rocks mutter, torrents shoot, crags speak, streams rave. Together with the darkness and the light, it's all 'like workings of one mind ... the Apocalypse ... Eternity' (p. 129)!

At the beginning of 'The Prelude', prepositions 'among', 'upon', 'into' ascribe depth and dimension to perceptions, and the physical verbs 'flowed', 'lay', 'carried' make abstract feelings palpable.

As well as the flowing blank verse of 'The Two-Part Prelude', Wordsworth is equally masterful in a range of poetic forms; form always suits function, and rhyming schemes are often deftly deployed. Observe how emotion is tamed to thought in the sonnets of 1802, or how the elegy suggested by Beaumont's painting of 'Peele Castle in a Storm', in its rhyming quatrains and lines punctuated with emotive exclamations (p. 130), allows the poet's extreme distress at his brother's death in 1805 to ring out as a pained 'cry of hurt' (p. xii). Or consider Wordsworth's use of apostrophe<sup>1</sup>: his emotion is vehemently yet

<sup>1</sup> Apostrophe: a figure of speech in which the poet addresses an absent person, an abstract idea, or a thing.

naturally conveyed as he addresses the Castle, 'thou rugged Pile!' (p. 130), the great poet 'Milton!' (p. 120), his touring friend 'Jones!' (p. 117) or the former slave and now imprisoned freedom fighter, Toussaint l'Ouverture, 'O miserable Chieftain!' (p. 119).

In 'Resolution and Independence', written in 1802, form and structure reflect, in a sense, the 'firmness of mind' of the central character and the security the poet seeks: twenty stanzas, each with seven lines of iambic pentameter, and a steady rhyme, ababbcc. Just as 'the sun is rising calm and bright' after a 'roaring in the wind all night' (p. 106), so is the poet rising out of despondency after the 'madness' of youth, renewing his own resolve. As Heaney puts it, he 'is a man who has come through' and the 'steady emotional keel beneath' the poems is evidence of his 'hard-earned reward of resolved crisis' (p. ix). The form and structure create a sense of being 'secure', mirroring the poet's prayer, 'God, ... be my help and stay secure' (p. III).

In the narrative poem 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill: *A True Story*', the eight-line stanzas in trochaic tetrameter, with rhyming scheme ababedcd, are a variation on the common four-line stanzas of ballads. With these features of the ballad form, readers are drawn into a story which has the gothic features that were becoming so popular in the early romantic period, Mrs Radcliffe's *Udolpho* (1794) being just one example. The modified ballad form carries the reader along to the poem's astonishing and thought-provoking ending.

Poetic forms in this collection include the sonnet, ballad, elegy, pastoral, and the ode. An ode praises or glorifies an event or individual. Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' is an irregular Pindaric ode in eleven stanzas, with the irregularities increasing throughout, multiple enjambments, and a triadic structure. As Wordsworth's conception of childhood is such an important theme, this ode deserves a close study.

## Close study

### Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood

The poet opines in the first movement that as we age, 'the visionary gleam' of childhood passes from us. He thinks that 'There hath past away a glory from the earth' and he asks: 'Where is it now, the glory and the dream?' In the second section, stanzas V to VIII, the poet expresses belief in the pre-existence of the soul: when we are born, he believes, we come 'trailing clouds of glory ... From God' (p. 101). In the third section he states his belief that within each of us there is a pure creative thinker, a 'best Philosopher', a 'Mighty Prophet' blest with acute vision. Our inner child can see the truths needed by the world, and has a 'human heart [with]... thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.' (p. 105). Our inner child's expansive thought, feeling and creativity remain within us, even after our actual childhood, and despite the adult roles we take on and the suffering we endure.

- What does this Ode praise?
- Does Wordsworth suggest that it is only children who are able to witness the divine within nature, or does he suggest that everyone can retain their 'inner child' (and their inner child's expansive creativity) if they choose to?
- To what extent does this Ode reveal a view of human psychological development similar to that found in 'The Prelude' and 'Tintern Abbey'?
- In the traditional Christian view, the believer gains immortality through Christ's resurrection; death is defeated by God's grace. What view of the path to immortality can be found in this poem?

### The Two-Part Prelude

**'Beloved Derwent, fairest of all streams ... Almost as silent as the turf they trod.'** (pp. 68-69).

In this passage, Wordsworth opens his biographical poem by addressing the river and reaching back to his earliest childhood experiences to trace how he became a poet, sharing with the reader his idea that childhood experiences are highly significant in the formation of the adult. His image of himself as a 'naked savage in the thunder-shower' draws our attention to his insistence that children are born innately good, and to the eighteenth century idea of the 'noble savage'.

Having established the central relationship in which Nature breathes life into the individual child, sending



‘a voice/ That flowed along my dreams’, the poet goes on to suggest that Nature is not only the agent of the child’s joys and fears, but also of the ‘spirits’ which, ‘when they would form a favoured being’, ‘open out the clouds’ and seek him with ‘gentle visitation’. This is a distinctly religious vision of Nature as a god who blesses a chosen one.

‘The Two-Part Prelude’ goes on to describe ‘spots of time’ in the poet’s memory of his life. The First Part tells of fear generated by overhanging rocks while in a boat at night; skating in the winter; playing games by the fire while it rained outside; fishing in the autumn; seeing in summer (when living at Hawkshead) a dead man raised from the lake; while out horse-riding, seeing a gibbet-mast where a man had been hung (p. 76); and experiencing with his two brothers the funeral of his father. Such incidents of ‘recollected hours’ (p. 81)—in which the ‘common face of Nature’ evoked emotions of fear or pleasure or happiness and spoke to him (p. 79)—now in the poet’s mature years ‘elevate the mind’ (p. 80) and ‘build up [the] human soul’ (p. 71).

In the Second Part, the poet takes the reader through to his teen years, by which time both his mother and father have died, and finishes by addressing his friend, ‘The most intense of Nature’s worshippers’ who has also ‘sought/ The truth in solitude’ (p. 95).

‘The Two-Part Prelude’:

- is autobiographical, showing that a childhood spent in communion with nature, and recollections in solitude of one’s emotions, provide a sure psychological foundation in later life;
- is a tribute to the importance of a free-ranging childhood in developing the imagination;
- traces an individual life, from happy childhood and childhood fears, through the trauma of being in danger or losing parents, to a mature remembering of past events and emotions that helps the poet to make meaning of his life;
- values solitude and also celebrates communal experiences;
- attributes agency to features of the landscape, ‘a huge cliff,/ As if with voluntary power instinct,/ Upreared its head.’ (p. 71), yet also insists on the unity and circularity of all aspects of life, placing the poet as one who lives ‘with God and Nature communing’ (p. 94);
- focuses on the self, detailing events that shape the poet’s imaginative life, and seeing ‘grandeur in the beatings of the heart’.

## For discussion

- Is this poem an interesting ‘life story’, a self-indulgent memoir, or a philosophy of life?
- What does the poem suggest about childhood as the foundation for personal growth?
- Do you agree that it’s valuable for young people to experience silence and solitude in bushland settings?
- Do we attribute agency to natural features of the landscape such as rivers, rocks, mountains etc?
- Given that child-care experts today also endorse the value of the natural environment in developing children’s imagination, do you think this poet would today be in favour of preserving natural bushland?
- Does the poem suggest that Nature acts as a kind of foster-parent? What do you think of this idea?

## Tintern Abbey

**‘Five years have past ... for themselves and for thy sake!’ (pp. 34–38).**

If driving south down the Wye valley in Wales on the A466, you may see Tintern Abbey below. It is an imposing sight. It fell to ruin when Henry VIII disbanded the monasteries in the sixteenth century; by Wordsworth’s time, the area had become industrialised. The ‘wreaths of smoke’ the poet sees could be charcoal burning, and the kiln or quarry workers living in and around the ruins could be the ‘vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods’. Also by this time, touring the Wye valley had been popularised by a friend of Thomas Gray, he whose landscape poetry (‘Elegy written in a Country Churchyard’) foreshadows the Romantics. In our time the ancient Abbey is open to the sky with just grass between its 900-year-old stones; seeing it can be an emotional experience, as can be any walking tour in the landscapes of Britain.

The poet’s intense reactions are stirred by his memory of visiting the Abbey’s surrounds five years before, and of his own youthful passions: back then, he had hopes for political change and was in love, but he had to flee from France on the outbreak of war and leave his pregnant lover behind. In the five years since, he has often been in an emotional state we would call depression. Now revisiting, he beholds the familiar landscape of the river valley, describing the ‘beauteous forms’ in blank verse with frequent euphonic half rhymes (‘winters’/‘waters’; ‘rolling’/‘soft’/‘lofty’; ‘impress’/‘connect’) or repetitions (‘these hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows’). His emphasis shifts in the second section from the landscape to

the self, as he explains that it is his memory of the beautiful forms of nature that affords him, in 'hours of weariness', the sweet sensations felt in the blood, along the heart and into the mind, bringing a 'deep power of joy' and enabling him to 'see into the life of things'.

The eight-line third section in which he personifies the river suggests the poet is describing a religious experience or belief: 'Oh sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,/ How often has my spirit turned to thee!' Next, the poet reflects on how much he has changed, from the boy who bounded about in both fear and 'glad animal movements', to a man who, despite having experienced loss, believes that he has gained much: he is now chastened and subdued by the 'still, sad music of humanity', resigned perhaps to political disillusionment. He goes on to explain that he has felt 'a presence', 'a sense sublime', whose dwelling is in the sun and the ocean and the air and in 'the mind of man'; this presence, 'a spirit that impels all thinking things', is recognised in Nature by the human senses of eye and ear, is the anchor of thought, and is the soul 'of all [his] moral being'.

The final section or denouement celebrates the poet's companions—his friend Coleridge whose 'wild eyes' remind him of his own earlier self, and his 'dear, dear Sister!' Dorothy with whom he shares a 'cheerful faith, that all which we behold/ Is full of blessings'. His reflections on the passage of time bring him now from the past and present to meditations on the future, as he envisions for Dorothy that 'wild ecstasies shall be matured/ Into a sober pleasure'. He hopes his companions will all remember this day, a day made more memorable to him because of his love for each of them.

What ideas and values does this poem reveal? The poet contends that nature—trees, plants, rocks, river, orchards, sky, air, perceived through human senses—provides not only a psychological stability for the individual, but is also a social good (in contemporary terms, an asset) that he perceives to be threatened by industrialisation. Wordsworth declares himself 'a worshipper of Nature', for whom emotion recollected in tranquility can be a spiritual experience, a mystical or sublime ecstasy. He connects this semi-religious belief with what seems to be his own personal recovery in a period of post-traumatic depression and perhaps also with his social concerns. Some suggest that the 'wreaths of smoke' allude to Wordsworth's concerns about the effects of industrialisation, just as his observation of homeless people and the 'Hermit' who 'sits alone' may show his social concerns.

- Do students experience a sense of pleasure or psychological calm or spiritual ecstasy when viewing a waterfall 'with a soft inland murmur'?
- In what ways are we selective about what we view as pleasurable 'scenery'?
- Wordsworth and his sister—who, as members of the professional classes, have some financial independence after 1795—are able to spend time on walking tours, which is an early form of tourism, and to feel that all is, for them, 'full of blessings'. Does this poem indicate concerns about industrialisation and social justice, or is it more about the poet's relieved, celebratory psychological state after years of depression?
- Does the poet view the Hermit and the houseless vagrants as part of the natural environment? What views do we have today of homeless people?
- Does the 'smokeless air' in 'Westminster Bridge' (p. 116) evoke a similar idea about smoke as the 'wreaths of smoke' in this poem? How do we, in our time, think of smoke in the air?
- The Christian God is said to be spirit, 'word', human, and 'in all things'. Do the ideas in the poems suggest belief in a Creator-God? What religious ideas do you see in the poems?

## The Ruined Cottage

'The old man said ... To human comfort.' (p. 9).

Courageous rural individuals who resolutely endure whatever vicissitudes society visits upon them are the subjects of 'The Ruined Cottage', 'Resolution and Independence', and 'Michael: A Pastoral'.

'The Ruined Cottage' directly engages with the politics of reform that swept the social, political, and cultural landscape in England during the 1790s. The poem values the industriousness of the working poor and shows how bad harvests, war, illness and widespread unemployment lead to the slow, pitiful decline of a poor but productive and hard-working family. This bleak narrative about change and death is the earliest version of what became Book I of nine philosophical monologues spoken by pastoral characters in 'The Excursion'.

The poet, out walking in the summer sun and considering where to take a rest, finds 'a ruined house' where he can slake his thirst; there he sees the old peddler Armytage, a fellow traveller. The old man tells him the story of the ruined cottage, of Margaret, her two children and her husband. The old wanderer grieves the death of 'poor Margaret', and the abandonment of her house and grounds. She had

been hospitable to him whenever he called in, and he had great affection for her: 'Oh sir, the good die first' he tells the poet. Robert was an industrious man who grew their own food, kept animals, and also worked all hours 'at his loom'. The loom indicates that this 'sober and steady' man worked as a weaver in the textile industry, but the change from cottage industry to large mills put him out of work.

The poem thus positions the reader to admire the rural working couple and the value of their work, and also to pity them. Our pity is focused mainly on the wife, as bad harvests, then war, illness, and unemployment make it so difficult for Robert that he abandons his family to 'join a troop of soldiers'. Each time old Armytage calls by, he witnesses Margaret's decline, as she loses her children and finally, after five 'tedious years' of 'unquiet widowhood', dies.

Throughout the poem, descriptions of natural features in the landscape function as comment on the social justice themes of the narrative. When the poet first arrives at the cottage to stretch his limbs, 'steady beams/ Of clear and pleasant sunshine interposed' between 'determined and unmoved shadows', but his hoped-for rest is interrupted by the abandoned garden with its 'matted weeds' and untended trees and plants. The old man sees in all this 'things which you cannot see': death and change. He opines that 'Even of the good is no memorial left.'

And he delivers this significant Wordsworthian view of the poet's function:

The poets, in their elegies and songs  
Lamenting the departed, call the groves,  
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,  
And senseless rocks – nor idly, for they speak  
In these their invocations with a voice  
Obedient to the strong creative power  
Of human passion. Sympathies there are  
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,  
That steal upon the meditative mind  
And grow with thought. (p. 9).

He suggests that there is an organic relationship between nature and human thought, and that the poet plays a central role in expressing the thoughts and passions of the human mind—for the good of society. Even the apparently 'senseless rocks' are offended when 'bonds of brotherhood' are broken, and all of nature exists to minister to 'human comfort'.

After telling his story, though, the old man implies that Margaret's death is part of the cycle of life: 'She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here'. He exhorts the poet to reflect that our feelings 'of sorrow and despair',

our 'uneasy thoughts' about 'ruin and ... change' and grief, could be 'but an idle dream' that interferes with a calm meditative life. The sun's 'mellow radiance' seems to confirm that death and change are merely part of the cycle of life.

- Does the poem idealise rustic poverty, or does it genuinely challenge the social factors which kept rural people of the time poor and marginalised? Do war, bad harvests, illness and unemployment keep rural people in our time poor and marginalised?
- In what ways are Margaret and Robert shown to be dignified and moral? How do rural people today reveal dignity and show themselves to be ethical, even in the face of difficulty?
- Could the poem have unsettled complacent middle class readers by confronting them with the realities of other people's lives (and the possibility of their own impoverishment or decline) in an increasingly marketised economy? Or does it, by pitying peasants and offering platitudes about nature and cycles of life, leave the reader still able to feel comfortable and complacent?
- Is the poem merely commenting on the circularity of natural processes of life and death and change, or is it advocating social justice for those affected by war, disease, drought and poverty?

## Resolution and Independence

Walking on the moor, the poet is dejected and sinks into worry about 'solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty'. (We know that in 1802 Wordsworth is feeling fearful of penury: he is about to marry Mary Hutchinson and knows he also has obligations to Annette Vallon.) But then the poet sees the old, poor leech-gatherer, whose occupation is severely challenged by decline in both the medicinal use of leeches and the ecosystem that made them abundant. The old man's 'firm mind' in the face of insurmountable difficulty shows the poet a better way to live, shows him an image of self-sufficiency, and rescues him from dejection and despair.

- In what ways are the ideas and values in this poem similar to, or different from, those in 'The Ruined Cottage'?
- To what extent is the poet 'troubled' by the old man's poverty? Or does he see him as a sort of sign from God, a 'peculiar grace,/ A leading from above' (p. 108), to bolster his own mood?
- To what extent is it valid for us to count our own blessings by observing the extreme difficulties experienced by others?

- ‘How is it that you live?’ (p. 110). Do you agree that literature helps us to ‘step into the shoes of others’, and in this way to consider how others live, and how we should live?

### Michael: A Pastoral Poem

An industrious rural couple work constantly, she at the spinning wheel, he looking after sheep and gardens. As ‘a pastoral poem’, we expect to see rural life and landscape idealised. Here, however, rural property as a family asset is the central issue, and the loss of the security it provides is catastrophic for the family. The boy Luke, if he worked hard in the city, might save the family asset, but after falling into ‘ignominy and shame’ in the ‘dissolute city’ he seeks a ‘hiding-place beyond the seas’, thus leaving his parents in grief and declining age. After they die, ‘the estate ... went into a stranger’s hand’ and all that’s left is the old oak tree and ‘the remains of the unfinished Sheep-fold’ (p. 67). The story evoked by this straggling heap of unhewn stones led the poet to feel—through the ‘power of Nature’ and the ‘gentle agency/ Of natural objects’—‘passions that were not my own’, and to think on ‘the heart of man’ (p. 54).

- In what ways are the ideas and values in this poem similar to, or different from, those in ‘The Ruined Cottage’ and ‘Resolution and Independence’?
- What view of ‘the heart of man’ emerges from the poems in this collection?
- To what extent does the poem idealise pastoral life and deride urban life?
- When land is viewed as an asset owned by an individual, the issue of succession or inheritance arises. Are there other issues for society in the private ownership and control of land?
- Does this poem’s implied support for private ownership of land in any way contradict the view of land as a public asset in other poems?
- How is industrialisation revealed as cause for anxiety in this poem?
- Does the reader infer from this poem that the poet is apprehensive about the future?
- Is the poem less about agrarian hardship than about the poet’s anxiety that he himself will die without an heir? Consider: ‘I will relate [the story] for the sake of youthful Poets, who/ Will be my second self when I am gone.’ (p. 55).

### French Revolution As It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven! (p. 127).

The exclamation marks in this poem tell the reader how very exciting it was to be in France when the Revolution began, for those ‘who had fed their childhood upon dreams’. This was Utopia actually taking form

... in the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us, – the place where in the end  
We find our happiness, or not at all! (p. 127).

The conjunction ‘but’ was sometimes printed as ‘and’. What difference could this make in the meaning? If ‘And’ comes at the turn into the new line, then the lines may be just about political enthusiasms. ‘But’, on the other hand, may suggest either the headiness of the time shadowed already by its later disappointments, or it may suggest that the joys of youth are more about sex than about political ideals.

- Is the enthusiasm expressed by the poet in this poem political only, or personal as well? What’s the basis for your answer?
- This poem was published in Coleridge’s periodical *The Friend*, in which he too outlined the hopes of the young for an ideal world. Does this poem suggest that fighting for ideals is a good and useful thing, or does it suggest that the young are susceptible to ideologies and will sensibly in later life leave their radical ideas behind?

### Composed near Calais, on the Road leading to Ardres, August 7, 1802

At the time of revisiting France in August and September 1802, Wordsworth wrote twenty-five sonnets. In this hiatus in the war and just prior to his marriage, he and Dorothy went to Calais to see Annette Vallon and Caroline. That he chose to write in sonnet form suggests that he is, if possible, distancing himself from emotion: the sonnet is an ideal form for expressing ideas and giving shape to intellectual thought. In these sonnets we see (now that we have the biographical information which was for a century suppressed) Wordsworth’s personal concerns connected with his political concerns.

‘Composed near Calais’ deals with the poet’s disillusionment in the aftermath of the French Revolution. He apostrophises Robert Jones, with whom he toured in France in 1793, describing in the octet the ‘songs, garlands, mirth’ (p. 117) of the celebratory crowds at that time, and the ‘too-

credulous' faith in 'Liberty' which had gripped him and his friends. The sestet introduces with 'And now...' his despondency at how things have deteriorated since the Reign of Terror; the poet now finds the familiar greeting, '*Good morrow, Citizen!*' to be disingenuous, a 'hollow word'. Yet he refuses to despair totally, even though he feels exposed by the degeneration of his political ideals. Perhaps his nostalgia for the youthful excitement of revolutionary hopes, combined secretly with his nostalgia for those days of first love, somehow provides a counter-balance to his distress at the excesses he remembers and the ruin he now sees.

### Written in London, September 1802

The poet's ideas in this sonnet are almost opposite to those in 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', which celebrates the beauty and majesty of London on a smoke-free early morning. In this sonnet, he expresses distress at the superficiality and greed he sees in England. Perhaps these differences in mood indicate the poet's highly emotional state as he revisits France, and his probable despondency at being of necessity separated from a loved one—which is suggested in the sonnet 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free'. In another sonnet, 'London 1802' addressed to the great poet Milton, he wishes England would return to its past glory; in 'Written in London' he is despondent that instead of political change in England, he sees increasing materialism. The poet thinks that 'plain living and high thinking are no more' (p. 121) because people in London worship the idols of wealth and avarice.

- Does the poet, in these sonnets, value social and political change? Or does he value a quiet domestic life?
- What views and values are expressed in the poems about rural and urban life?

### Elegies

The elegy Wordsworth wrote in 1806 after the death of his brother John seems expansively mournful, with strong emotions expressed in its iambic pentameter rhyming quatrains. Yet the poet seems to derive hope from viewing Beaumont's painting of the 'rugged Pile' of stones, 'this huge Castle, standing here sublime', encased 'in the unfeeling armour of old time' (p. 131) braving the lightning, wind and waves. It's as if the castle's defiance of death and the immortality of its stones give the poet hope, perhaps for the immortality of his brother's soul:

A power is gone, which nothing can restore;  
A deep distress hath humanized my Soul ...  
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.  
(p. 131)

In 'Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg', however, the poet seems more resigned to death. Many of the poets of Wordsworth's generation have already died in the decade preceding the death of Mrs Felicia Hemans in 1835. Wordsworth feels keenly the fact that he is the oldest, yet his friends have pre-deceased him: Coleridge 'the rapt One', Scott 'the mighty Minstrel', Charles Lamb 'the frolic and the gentle', George Crabbe the Border poet, James Hogg the 'Etrick Shepherd', and now Mrs Hemans whose poem 'Casabianca' about the heroic boy on the burning deck became so popular in the nineteenth century (and who rates a mention in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*). Wordsworth's recollection of the smoke hanging above the city of London, which he saw from Hampstead Heath with Crabbe, becomes a symbolic funeral wreath for the passing of this generation of English writers. Older now, and sadder, Wordsworth opines that 'our haughty life is crowned with darkness' (p. 140), yet he seems to suggest that there's no need to mourn for those who die in old age:

... but why,  
O'er ripe fruit, seasonably gathered,  
Should frail survivors heave a sigh?

- What is the poet's attitude to ageing and death in these elegiac poems?
- Can we still see the sense of a natural cycle of life that we saw in the earlier poems?
- Which word describes the poet's reaction to the death of fellow-poets: resigned, accepting, cynical, celebratory, nostalgic?

## Further activities

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... Therefore am I still

A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth ... (p. 37).

Are contemporary students ‘lovers of the bush and the mountains’? Have they watched a sunset, listened to birds in the bush, looked at a waterfall, walked alone on a beach, camped in the inland, or been in a rainforest, and felt something akin to the spiritual experiences described in the poems? Discuss why and where we look for uplifting experiences. What are the sights and sounds that we consider ‘sublime’? Does it make any difference that in Australia the earth isn’t often ‘green’? Wordsworth seems to be selective about what constitutes ‘scenery’, including waterfalls, rainbows, lakes, trees, rocks and birds, but ignoring cattle, pigs and sheep. What is our definition of ‘Nature’?

Where are our students likely to experience epiphanies, moments of intense pleasure, or religious insight?

Many of the poems allude to political or social issues, and some celebrate political activism. If Wordsworth were alive today, would he be politically active, and if so, which causes would he support? Students could give a talk to the class explaining their answer, using quotes from the poems as evidence.

Consider the poetry, and the lives, of Judith Wright and John Kinsella, and the prose of Tim Winton. How do/did these writers promote ecological causes? What is the connection between writing and environmental activism, for each of them?<sup>2</sup> What sorts of emotions in relation to Nature do people experience today?

For urban people, walking or travelling in natural landscapes can be emotionally and psychologically restorative. But does tourism wreck places like the wild areas of Tasmania or Uluru in Central Australia? Write a speech arguing that all tourism should be stopped in places such as the Great Barrier Reef or Venice. Use quotes from at least one poem to support your argument.

Is it important to experience extended periods of

solitude and silence? Listen to the ABC *The Minefield* podcast ‘Needs of the Soul: Silence’, in which two philosophers ask ‘what makes for a healthy moral life?’, suggesting that ‘In a time characterised by clamour and empty chatter, it’s never been more important—or more difficult—to reclaim the importance of silence’. Give a talk to the class or write an opinion piece or a blog post about the view that we need periods of solitude and silence for our own psychological and emotional wellbeing. Do you agree with this view?

## Debates

Using quotations from the poems to support your arguments, debate in pairs or teams topics such as:

- We are dependent on the natural environment for more than food and water.
- All young children should have regular access to ‘bush kindergarten’.
- It’s by facing challenges in life that we grow.
- ‘The love of nature leads to love of mankind’ (Wordsworth).
- Teenagers need to spend more time alone in the bush—without phones or iPads or laptops.
- Tourism is destroying our world.
- More land should be preserved as National Parks.
- The size and spread of towns and cities should be limited.
- Consumerism is the curse of our time.
- Greed and selfishness drive the desire to own, rather than preserve, the natural environment.
- People believe in fighting for causes when young, but as they age they always seek the quiet life.

## Ideas continuum

Have students place themselves along a line between the opposing views, and give reasons (and quotations from the poems) for their position.

- Natural landscapes should be left untouched <----> Agricultural businesses require cleared and privatised land for the efficient production of society’s food and housing
- The beauty of Nature inspires people <----> Nature can be cruel and terrifying

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Wright was concerned with ‘ourselves as part of the life of creation as a whole’ (Brady). John Kinsella writes with brutal realism confronting the damage done to the environment, and aims for change; his realism and urgency for action is the exact opposite of Wordsworth’s concept of poetry as ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ (Gorton 2016). Similarly Tim Winton, an environmental ‘campaigner’ (2016, p. 156), says of his ‘massive’ home state that it ‘is blessed with natural assets, and a new generation [is] pushing for a more prudent stewardship of all this bounty.’

- The rights and identity of the individual should be protected <-----> a civil society needs laws which inevitably constrict the actions of the individual
- Imagination is the wellspring of creativity <-----> Reason and logic are more important than imagination
- Emotion recollected in tranquility enables personal growth <-----> clear thinking, not emotion, leads to personal growth
- Political activists, with their ideals and imagination, are the people who bring about social change <-----> A stable democracy needs conservative logical thinkers and steady incremental change.

Conduct a trial of Wordsworth. One person accuses him (using two or three poems as evidence), and another defends (also using poems as evidence). Possible accusations could be:

- the poems treat Nature as if the poet is a tourist taking photos. He takes his photo and moves on, but he expresses no ethical or moral sense of the need to care for that natural scenery.
- the poems show that the poet lived a life of leisure in a time of war and upheaval, benefitting neither his community nor the ethics and politics of his society.
- the poet retreated from the public to the private sphere.

In written reflections, use quotations from the poems to explain your point of view.

Give a presentation to the class on this topic:

‘Wordsworth shows that it is our emotions—whether sad, despairing, fearful, nostalgic or blissful—that provide us with moments of epiphany and insight.’ In a written reflection, use quotations from the poems to explain your point of view.

To further explore the poems, students could:

- write very short summaries in their own words of: the First and Second Parts of ‘The Prelude’, First and Second Parts of ‘The Ruined Cottage’, ‘Michael’, ‘There Was a Boy’, ‘A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags’.
- summarise in a few sentences the argument made in this passage from ‘The Two-Part Prelude’, and explain the argument to the class, giving their own view of it:

If in my youth I have been pure in heart,  
If, mingling with the world, I am content  
With my own modest pleasures, and have lived  
With God and Nature communing, removed  
From little enmities and low desires,

The gift is yours; if in these times of fear,  
This melancholy waste of hopes o’erthrown,  
If, mid indifference and apathy  
And wicked exultation, when good men  
On every side fall off we know not how  
To selfishness, disguised in gentle names  
Of peace and quiet and domestic love –  
Yet mingled, not unwillingly, with sneers  
On visionary minds – if, in this time  
Of dereliction and dismay, I yet  
Despair not of our nature, but retain  
A more than Roman confidence, a faith  
That fails not, in all sorrow my support,  
The blessing of my life, the gift is yours  
Ye mountains, thine O Nature. Thou hast fed  
My lofty speculations, and in thee  
For this uneasy heart of ours I find  
A never-failing principle of joy  
And purest passion. (pp. 94-95).

- summarise the arguments made in: ‘Expostulation and Reply’ (p. 30), ‘The Tables Turned’ (p. 32), ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ (p. 99), ‘French Revolution As It Appeared to Enthusiasts’ (p. 127), proposing different interpretations of each poem. Interpretations could be developed in pairs or groups and shown on butcher’s paper around the walls, or created in a discussion thread on Google Classroom.
- compare each of these poems with another poem in the collection, explaining the structure, language features, and meaning of each: ‘To the Cuckoo’, ‘My heart leaps up when I behold’, ‘The Solitary Reaper’, ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’. Propose different interpretations of each poem. Or choose two sonnets to compare, explaining their meaning with reference to the sonnet form, and proposing different interpretations of each poem.
- present to the class two-minute explanations of ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’ and ‘Yarrow Unvisited’, including an explanation of the ballad form and the meaning of each poem.

## Key quotes

'In all forms of things/ There is a mind' (p. 5).

'... what we feel of sorrow and despair/ From ruin and from change.../ Appeared an idle dream that could not live/ Where meditation was.' (p. 22).

'Have I not reason to lament/ What man has made of man?' (p. 29).

'One impulse from a vernal wood/ May teach you more of man,/ Of moral evil and of good,/ Than all the sages can.' (p. 32).

'... 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, — ...  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.' (p. 37).

'What need there is to ... temper all our thoughts with charity.' (p. 53).

'... I was taught to feel ... The self-sufficing power of solitude.' (p. 83).

'blest the babe ... who ... / Doth gather passion from his mother's eye.' (p. 88).

'My heart leaps up when I behold/ A rainbow in the sky' (p. 98).

'Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/ Where is it now, the glory and the dream?' (p. 101).

'... the fear that kills;/ And hope that is unwilling to be fed' (p. 110).

'The world is too much with us; late and soon,/ Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers' (p. 114).

'For oft, when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or in pensive mood,/ They flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude' (p. 126).

'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/ But to be young was very heaven!' (p. 127).

'A deep distress hath humanized my Soul.' (p. 131).

'Surprised by joy – impatient as the Wind/ I turned to share the transport – Oh! ...' (p. 136).

## Analytical text response

- How does the poetry in this collection explore the interdependence between humans and the natural environment?
- “The child is father to the Man”  
How does Wordsworth explore the idea that childhood experiences are significant in shaping the adult life?
- ‘Although the poems show concern for others, they seem more concerned with the self.’ Discuss.
- To what extent does Wordsworth’s poetry suggest that natural rural landscapes must be preserved despite the needs of commerce?
- “... and I grew up/ Fostered alike by beauty and by fear.”  
‘Wordsworth’s poetry is animated more by fear than by awe.’  
Do you agree?
- “Not without hope we suffer and we mourn”  
How does Wordsworth’s poetry explore this idea?
- “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven!”  
What ideas and values about youth are revealed in this collection of Wordsworth’s poems?
- ‘The poems reveal an ambivalent attitude towards the social changes of the time.’ Discuss.
- “... with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.”  
How does Wordsworth’s poetry ‘see into the life of things’?
- “The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers”  
‘The poems in this collection condemn materialism, suggesting that it destroys the life of mind and spirit.’ Discuss.
- “Whither is fled the visionary gleam?”  
‘Despite the sense of loss in the poems, the poet more often expresses hope and joy.’  
To what extent do you agree?



## Creative text response

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- Select a particular landscape, bushland or rural area in Victoria which in your view needs to be protected from desecration. Develop a presentation, with accompanying PowerPoint slides, on why this landscape, and/or the animals in it, needs to be preserved. Include in your presentation this quote (and others, where relevant):

... Therefore am I still  
A lover ... of all the mighty world  
Of eye, and ear, — ...  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being. (p. 37).

- Would Wordsworth be a political activist for environment causes or for sustainable energy, if he were living in our time? Write a sonnet in the style of his 1802 sonnets that begins by addressing Wordsworth and goes on to describe (octet), and reflect on (sestet), the reasons why we need his ideas in the twenty-first century.
- Write a sonnet that expresses your views on an ecological issue in Australia or Victoria today. In your written reflection, explain how this mirrors Wordsworth's poetry.
- Is Wordsworth more interested in individual growth than in social progress? Write a post for a blog that's entitled *Wordsworth Studies*. Use quotations from the poems in both your post, and in your reflection on it.
- Write a poem about a person with mental health issues who lives in a non-urban area or in the bush. Reflect on the similarities and differences between yours and Wordsworth's poetry.
- Write a persuasive speech with accompanying slide presentation for a school Principal who believes that all Year 8 or 9 students should spend a week in the bush without mobile phones or laptops. The Principal, to help convince the school community, uses quotations from Wordsworth (and perhaps other writers) as supporting arguments. In your reflection, show how and why the Principal has adopted Wordsworth's language and ideas.
- Write a short story about a person whose commitment to preserving natural flora, fauna, soil or water is motivated by his/her religious beliefs and emotional experiences. In the story and in an orally presented reflection, use quotations from Wordsworth's poetry to explain this conservationist's motivations, and your own views.
- Pitch a concept for a video game (including music, artwork and script ideas) that explores the idea of 'experiencing the sublime'. Include references to Wordsworth's poetry in both the pitch and your reflection. (See podcast 'What's in a Game' from BBC Radio 4 series 'Seriously...')

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