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Week 3: Wordsworth's Poetry and the Power of Nature Schedule and Assignments (8/28--9/4)

EN 206 Unit 1: Romantic and Victorian Poetry Week 3 (F 8/28— F 9/4)
Introduction and Assignments

Week 3: William Wordsworth and the Power of Nature

What to Do This Week:

- 1) Read through my initial preliminary introduction to Wordsworth's poetry just below here in this document. (10-15 minutes)
 - 2) View the videos then listed next in this document. (80 minutes)
 - 3) Read then the assigned poems listed next in this document. (40 minutes)
 - 4) Compose a 'journal entry' in response to the journal prompt found in this document and submit it as an original post to the Blackboard Discussion Board Thread for Week 3 by 11:59 on Tuesday September 1. (45 minutes)
 - 5) Then compose and submit two 'reply' posts to our Week 2 Discussion Board Thread on Blackboard by noon on Thursday September 3rd; see directions at the end of this document about what to post. (20 minutes)
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1) Introduction: William Wordsworth and the Power of Nature

- a) If you did view the Introduction to Romanticism powerpoint assigned a week and a half ago, you may recall that William Wordsworth was one of the first generation English Romantic poets, writing much of his poetry between 1790 and 1820. Responding to the 18th century focus on reason (the Enlightenment), the romantic wanted to stress the importance of the synthesizing imagination and modulated emotion in understanding the world and our place in it, particularly our relationship to nature.
- b) As with the other romantic poets, Wordsworth like Blake valued the imagination as holistic way of understanding how all the things in the world might fit together in a meaningful organic way, something especially crucial at a time when *the Industrial Revolution was beginning to mechanize the world and the French Revolution had revealed how unfair traditional European societies could be* in terms of human equality.
- c) As with the other romantics, he was especially keen on looking to nature for the harmony, peace, and spirituality it could provide. Hand in hand with this turn to nature for the romantics (including WW) was a special emphasis on the importance of childhood as an intuitive time of innocence—one that could powerfully connect us to nature and the spiritual powers and moral insight it inspired.

- d) And like Blake, he explores both the purity of childhood (innocence) and the subsequent loss of it as we grow older (experience).
- e) Unlike Blake's *Songs*, however, Wordsworth was less interested in exploring the contrasts between childhood and adulthood than in exploring the continuity between the two—how both were crucial in differing and complementary ways for humans as we grow up. One of his famous lines in this regard is: "the child is the father of the man." Think about that. Both stages/ages are important in our development and the former provides the foundation for the later. It is not an either/or, but a this and then that.
- f) Moreover, in terms of nature, Wordsworth was always quite explicit about its value and power: turn in solitude to nature and you can both get a break from life's immediate pressures and an opportunity to revel in nature's glory, which includes importantly its ability to connect us to something beyond it, in particular to the spiritual and moral forces that bind us as a human community.
- g) Consider the following quote about the power and function of nature for Wordsworth and the Romantics:

Romanticism and nature are almost synonymous. The quintessential Romantic lyric suggests a mystical relationship with nature; the poet has the ability through his imagination and his experience in a natural setting to transcend his everyday life and troubles and to connect with a spiritual essence or something divine that then allows him to re-conceive of his life, enabling him to overcome the deadening of life he has confronted.

[As in "Tintern Abbey"]he speaker encounters or remembers a setting in nature – in this case, Wordsworth reflects on seeing the decayed abbey in its natural setting after an absence of five years – and then exploring his reactions to the setting, he meditates on the relationship between himself and nature in general. Wordsworth recalls how his memories of this setting have renewed his life when he has lived in the city, but he also begins to realize that it is his more adult relationship to nature – rather than his youthful one when he unconsciously felt at one with it – that is more significant, for it provides him with a moral connection to humanity and to some spiritual essence greater than humanity. As important, he stresses that it is not simply nature's influence on him, but equally his perception of nature – the role his consciousness and his imagination play in producing this experience: "of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear,--both what they half create,/ And what perceive" (105–107). [The Saylor Group]

- h) As this last quote suggests, while nature is in itself a powerful and singular force that provides both immediate pleasure and tranquil restoration, perhaps its key role is in

stimulating the viewer/speaker's own thought process—allowing him or her to then connect to some shared human concern related to morality and/or spirituality.

- i) And finally, it is perhaps one of the greatest Romantic scholars, M. H. Abrams, who best describes this sequence (landscape description>meditation>return to landscape):

" . . . [t]he speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation."

2) View the Videos:

- a) For this week's selections I would first like you to sit through a fairly long (one hour) documentary made by a few years ago by the BBC (Britain's main outlet for news and entertainment)--and narrated by a famous British biographer and novelist, Peter Ackroyd. The video is entitled 'The Romantics: Nature', and it provides a 'big picture' cultural view of the times, including why nature became so important back then. The documentary ranges through a number of key romantic writers (and thus will have value for subsequent weeks too), with Wordsworth not surprisingly getting a good deal of attention in the middle. It can be a bit of slough, but is worth it:

--'The Romantics: Nature' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMIXWiLcnok>

- b) Next I would like you to take a look at a couple of shorter videos (10 minutes x2) concerning one of the three Wordsworth poems you will be reading, "Tintern Abbey." Written early in his career, the poem recounts a visit to a place in nature that he had visited five years earlier: a ruined abbey and its splendid surrounding scenery. As you will see, a celebration of nature, especially its larger sublime aspects, is entwined with the poet's own thoughts about how he has grown over the years. Notice too that he weighs the tradeoff: the immediate sensuous joy in nature of his youth versus his later adult's philosophical and meditative understanding of nature and life. The first video is simply a reading of the poem with supporting visual images, while the second is a fairly useful short analysis of it. (Note: the ruined abbey is located in a remote and scenic area of Wales near the border of northwestern England, adjacent to the Lake District area where Wordsworth and Coleridge lived).

--Video Reading of "Tintern Abbey":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YADowZkMKY4>

--Brief Video Analysis of "Tintern Abbey":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tERIINggYo>

3) Read the assigned poems (3): The first two poems---"Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" and 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'--are simple enough to find, either in our anthology under the Wordsworth section or via an internet search. They are what would I call midsized; each should take about 10-15 minutes or so to read. The last reading is a group of three key episodes from Wordsworth's masterpiece--his sprawling autobiographical epic--**The Prelude**.

- a) The "Tintern Abbey" poem should hopefully make some sense to you in terms of Wordsworth's approach to nature after hearing the poem and listening to an analysis of it.
- b) See then what you think of the "Immortality Ode." It similarly is about the transition from childhood to adulthood via our interactions with nature. Yet it definitely starts out on very alarming note for the speaker. See what you think. And maybe think about how it is both similar to and different from "Tintern Abbey."
- c) Perhaps trickiest of the group are the selections from the epic (really long) poem **The Prelude**. Tricky only in that the key selections, which Wordsworth calls 'spots of time,' self-contained small episodes from his childhood, are spread throughout the long poem. Anyway for the ones I am asking you read note the typical three-part structure: a description of an often haunting and solitary experience in nature as a child; the boy's immediate reaction and attempt to process the experience afterwards; and then his much later adult reflection on the experience.

---READ THIS (not the whole epic): Here are the three episodes/selections from **The Prelude** (find online or in our anthology) to read for our class: The Bird Egg Plundering (Book 1: lines 305-371); The Rowboat at Night (Book 1: lines 372-451); and The Horse Ride (Book 11: lines 257-344). How might they extend and also differ from the approach to nature in the earlier two poems? [Note: these episodes are not labeled with the titles I supply here, but for convenience that is how critics have typically discussed them]

4) Compose a 'journal entry' that you submit as an original post to our Week 3 Discussion Board Thread. [upload via Turnitin a journal entry of 250-300 words by the end of the day on Tuesday September 1st (11:59 pm)]. These journal entries--combined

with the two related discussion thread 'reply' posts (see item 5 below)—will be graded on a typical hundred point scale and will accumulate through the semester to comprise 25% of your final grade. **Choose one of the following three prompts** for your 'journal entry' (original post):

- a) In "Tintern Abbey" the poet-persona (Wordsworth) revisits a natural setting that had been dear to him at a much younger age. Can you recall and explain a similar experience you had when returning to a favorite natural scene or setting? In addition to explaining your own "Tintern Abbey" experience, please do connect it to Wordsworth's poem. Begin your entry with a few remarks about Wordsworth's poem, perhaps (though not necessarily) what it suggests about time, memory, and nature. Then shift to and explain your own personal experience, integrating two short relevant quotes (1-2 lines in length) into the middle and/or end of your entry.
- b) Both "Tintern Abbey" and the later "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" focus on how we differently experience nature at various stages in our life. Yet the tone of the two poems is often quite different—the Wordsworth of the first poem is often more peaceful and relaxed, while the Wordsworth of the second poem is often more perplexed and unsettled. Share with us your understanding of why these poems, both focused on nature and maturation, differ so much in terms of tone and urgency. Include one brief quote (two lines or less) from each poem.
- c) The famous 'spots of time' from **The Prelude** (you have read three of them) typically contain three parts: a child's haunting experience of nature, the child's immediate attempt afterwards to understand the experience, and the adult speaker's much later reflection on the significance of the original experience in terms of what it tells us about nature and its power. Walk us through any one of these three "spots of time," explaining what it tells us about the power and purpose of nature. Include two (or three) brief quotes (1-2 lines each).

- 5) **Make two REPLY Posts to our Week 3 Discussion Board Thread:** From Tuesday September 1st through Thursday September 3rd (noon) make two REPLY posts (25 or more words—keep it lean) that respond directly to another student's post, either an original journal post or another student's reply post (anywhere in the thread).