

**Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Book Fifth through Book Eighth:
Foreboding, Progress, and Return**

BUT, to outweigh all harm, the sacred Book,
In dusty sequestration wrapt too long,
Assumes the accents of our native tongue;
And he who guides the plough, or wields the crook,
With understanding spirit now may look
Upon her records, listen to her song,
And sift her laws--much wondering that the wrong,
Which Faith has suffered, Heaven could calmly brook.
Transcendent boon! noblest that earthly King
Ever bestowed to equalize and bless
Under the weight of mortal wretchedness!
But passions spread like plagues, and thousands wild
With bigotry shall tread the Offering
Beneath their feet, detested and defiled.

--Wordsworth, *Ecclesiastical Sonnet 29* "Translation of the Bible"

Books five through eight of *The Prelude* take us through several important themes and episodes in Wordsworth's poetic and maturational development. Chapter five while exploring the problem of human suffering is more focused on Wordsworth's views of childhood education, and book six after considering what would be his future relationship with Coleridge, uses his journey to the Alps to explore the beautiful and sublime sides of nature. Book seven represents a very different side of the poet—one who was able to write powerful satire of urban life; it is built around a number of rushing epic catalogues. After the fire and energy of book seven, book eight is a far more meandering chapter—it makes a case for why the city did not cause him to lose faith in human possibility, yet does so by moving associatively among a number of different interrelated reflections on his rural upbringing.

Exploratory Questions (Books Five through Eight)

- Which books have had the greatest impact upon your life?
- Can dreams be significant? Do they ever impart messages?
- Have you ever taken a trip that radically challenged your life?
- Has a move from one place to another ever altered your life in significant ways?
- Are there any significant biblical images that have shaped your understanding of your own life meaning?
- Do you prefer city or country life? Why?

Brief Commentary and Discussion Questions

Book Fifth [*Books*]

5.1-49—The first of Wordsworth's meditations on the problem of evil and suffering. Even if the soul is immortal, one is at pains to anticipate that loss of bodily life and accomplishment. There seems to be a mismatch between the soul's aspirations and the material forms. And this meditation prepares for the meaning of the apocalyptic dream of the next section.

5.50-192—An extended account of an apocalyptic dream which he attributes to a friend (in the 1850 version to himself). While the teller invokes Don Quixote, it is actually an Orientalist fantasy of allegorical significance—the lance (the knightly quest), the stone, and the shell each have import; the

stone is the book of Nature (as in empirical study) and the shell the Book of God (as in revelation of the eternal). The knight is fleeing the Flood (perhaps a symbol of chaos, as well as apocalypse), a fate the teller comes to fear, too. Wordsworth interprets the dream to be a warning for his own vocation.

5.193-222—A defense of the honor of poets who possess “natural” inspiration—Homer, David, the balladeers of English verse. (Note the additional line in the 1850, 5.221 in which he also adds the Incarnation.)

5.223-245. The remainder of the fifth book treats the theme of childhood education as a kind of *cantus firmus* to its various polyphonic echoes. Wordsworth begins by decrying those educators who would train children with an exhausting and strict supervision, not unlike those who pasture their flocks to prepare them for slaughter.

5.246-290a—He uses an extended metaphor of a mother hen raising her chicks in accord with their natural desires and abilities. He also praises his own mother who died when he was eight for her natural educational love and tender freedoms.

5.290b-369—In contrast, he develops an extended satire on the Child Prodigy, who in his attempted perfection, becomes a kind of mutation that is out of proportion to his context—a product that appears too perfect in morality and learning, but has really lost all connection to the earth.

5.370-388—Transitional stanza that moves from the foolish and pride of educational theorists to the simpler way of a more natural education.

5.389-449—“There was a boy,” a previously written poem on simplicity (thru 5.413), forms part of a thanksgiving hymn for Wordsworth’s own rural education.

5.450-515—Wordsworth now returns to more autobiographical material, recalling the discovery of a drowned man and how the reading of fairy tales had prepared him for the shock. He tells further of his and another boy’s interest in *The Arabian Nights* as well as other childhood books.

5.516-557—How fantasy prepares the heart against a more limited material world.

5.558-607—His early failed poems have a freshness about them that is linked to this kind of education, even if they suffer in other, more formal ways.

5.608-637—Finally, Wordsworth adds some closing meditations on the mystery that exists between thought and life and that of language.

Discussion Questions for Book Fifth

1. Why does Wordsworth open the fifth book with a meditation upon bodily suffering (and temporality) and an apocalyptic dream, only to turn to a renewed pledge to his calling?
2. Is Wordsworth being overly harsh on organized childhood education? Would children be better off left to roam more freely and be taught from the books they find enjoyable?
3. Is he correct to decry the creation of the childhood prodigy? Is it an accurate picture?
4. Just as there is a strange give-and-take between soul and body, so is there an equal transaction between thought and life and that of language? What do you think?

Book Sixth [Cambridge and the Alps]

6.1-79—He returns to Cambridge and the next two years find him a more focused, serious person. He has no desire to be an academic, nor to study for Honors, yet his poetic seriousness begins to finally bloom.

6.80-134—His winter walks are an example of his moving towards poetic Faerie, while he admits he suffered from the failure of young writers of mimicking cultured phrases not his own.

6.135-207—Through 6.187, he reflects on geometry and its relationship to God and eternal things, and that it gave him a sense of peace, even if he hadn't a talent for the subject. From 6.160-185, he uses an extended simile of a shipwrecked figure who uses geometry as a consolation against his material suffering. He ends the section by reflecting on his propensity for melancholy and by summarizing the state of his mind at the time.

6.208-260—More about his summer travels with his sister Dorothy. He portrays Brougham Castle as an Arcadian setting, following Sidney. He also remembers Mary Hutchinson (his future wife) being with them. Coleridge was not there, yet memory wants to place him there. [An interesting dilemma considering his high trust in recollection's role in his poetics.]

6.261-331—An eulogy to Coleridge ends the first section of book six. He expands upon the contrast between himself and Coleridge, the later living a more urban, more esoteric, and more academic life. Yet Wordsworth sees them as predestined twin spirits, even though he suggests that, at this time, he was not mature enough to really appreciate Coleridge's more abstract and inward learning.

6.332-425—The remainder of book six is considered by many one of the climaxes of the poem, if not the climax. We certainly now come to one of Wordsworth's formative experiences. He describes the feelings of people in France as Robert Jones and he travel through the countryside. Being from England, they are associated with the English Revolution in people's minds.

[1850: 6.419-488]—The 1816/1819 addition of a passage upon the convent at Chartreuse offers a more conflicted reflection upon revolutionary treatment of the religious.

6.426-524-- Mount Blanc and the attending valleys represent two sides of the experience—one more peaceful and beautiful, the other more threatening and overwhelming. Becoming lost and being helped to cross the Alps has important thematic and symbolic value.

6.525-572—The storm stands out here as one of the more negative natural experiences, yet as part of the sublime, it also suggests, Wordsworth opines, another aspect of the Eternal Mind revealing itself. The next two passages illustrate this more.

6.573-617—Lake Maggiore's beauty is another example of the way that natural beauty can call forth gratitude in a person.

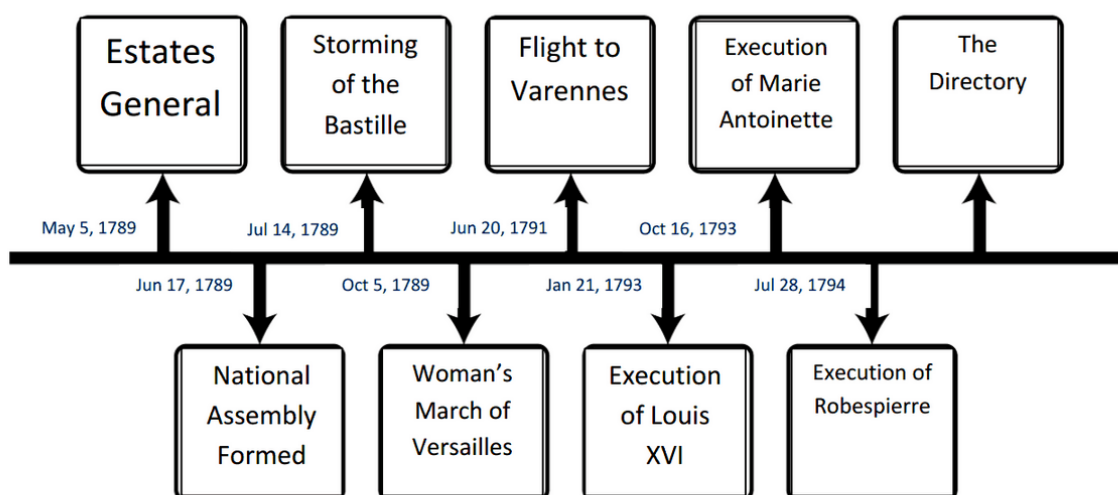
6.618-656—Jones and Wordsworth are lost again and have a much less pleasant experience out in nature. The scene is obliquely funny.

6.657-705—Wordsworth now transitions to end book six with more general reflections on the dual faces of nature, one gentle; one grand. The mention of the local excitement at Brabant armies serves as a kind of coda to the book.

Discussion Questions for Book Sixth

1. Do you enjoy mathematics? Why do you think Wordsworth found them consoling?
2. What makes Wordsworth and Coleridge such different people? Why do you think they, nonetheless, eventually became good friends?
3. How does Wordsworth portray the attitudes of the people in France and in the Alps during the first days of the French Revolution in 1790?
4. Why do you think that many consider his journey though France and to the Alps a high point for the story?
5. How do we balance (or do we balance) the enjoyable and threatening faces of nature?
6. Likewise, does Wordsworth have a consistent set of ideas about nature and the eternal?
7. Is there a thematic connection to be drawn between the feelings surrounding the French Revolution and the travelers' dual experience in the Alps?

Brief Timeline of the French Revolution



Book Seventh (*Residence in London*)

7.1-56—An opening in the “now” of October 1804, Wordsworth gains new inspiration at winter to sing again of his theme.

7.57-120—Two short transitional sections that describe the state of Wordsworth’s mind as he graduates from Cambridge and takes up residence in London and that contrast his childhood country idealization of the city with the disappointing experience of one village boy who had gone to school there for a season.

7.121-310—An extensive section that uses the device of the epic catalogue in several intertwined descriptions of the City as an extended carnival. It breaks down, thusly:

7.121-154—the initial catalogue of sights one expects to see in London, his mixture of interest in disappointment in then living there, which he now recalls at present (1804) as a kind of pastime.

7.155-183—the next catalogue of Babel and its overwhelming impressions on the visitor.

7.184-204—the less tumultuous diversions of life at the Inns of Court.

7.205-226—returning to the throng with another catalogue, this one of random strange sights on the streets.

7.227-243—a catalogue of the cosmopolitan chaos of global, multi-ethnic London

7.244-280—a catalogue of a zoo or the “sights” one might see in paintings and drawings on display.

7.281-310—the last catalogue of the carnival sights at Sadler’s Wells.

7.311-346—He describes his interest in the theatre by first discussing the play *Edward and Susan*, the story of the Maid of Buttermere, and how Mary Robinson was for them an example of triumph over dishonor. (7.311-516 represents another longer set of interrelated sections that reflect on the nature of melodrama and Wordsworth’s interest in the theatre.—We’ll discuss melodrama more with book nine.)

7.347-413—He imagines Mary with her child living in nobility in the country, and then follows this with the belief that he saw such a mother and child at the theatre, the child’s innocence setting him apart from the vulgar and corrupt theatergoers. [The reworked version from 1816/19 is a clearer version, though it adds little to the 1805 in terms of content.]

7.414-435—A painful aside on his first seeing a prostitute at the theatre and how it deeply disturbed his view of humanity.

7.436-516—He returns to a general defense of the joys of the theatre, especially in watching the actors, and he defends them as having a general set of lessons in human life and character.

7.517-543—A generally sarcastic portrait of the oratorical excesses of court battles, though there is a hint of admiration.

[1850: 7.512-543—The 1832 Burke ode offers some valuable insights into the older, more conservative Wordsworth’s regrets at not taking Edmund Burke seriously. It clearly doesn’t fit the 1805 version.]

7.544-566—Another satire on the oratorical urban preacher.

7.567-623—He admits that he could continue to pile up examples of urban folly and vice. He includes a reflective passage on the meaning of such a world, especially the mystery of the human face in such an environment. (The 1850 addition 7.621-625 also adds a reflective note.) The blind beggar is an emblem of the state of most of the human race.

7.624-695—Wordsworth opens until line 645a with a more subtle meditation on moments that are quieter and more lonely, only to plunge back into another catalogue describing St. Bartholomew’s Fair as a hellish world of mob chaos. (A passage worthy of Pope’s *The Dunciad*.)

7.696-741—Wordsworth closes with another defense of such scenes, suggesting that these too were part of his poetic education, and that being a child of Nature made it possible to still feel her power in the middle of it. [The 1850 revision adds two examples/idealizations of this theme—the American Indian and the Arab, cf. 7.746-796a.]

Discussion Questions for Book Seventh

1. Why does Wordsworth open with a contemporary moment of him at winter receiving inspiration?
2. What is the effect of his extensive catalogues of city life in all its chaotic complexity?
3. Likewise, what value does he find in the theatre despite its sometimes shady surroundings?
4. Why does Wordsworth mock the speeches of the lawyer and the urban preacher?
5. What does book seven teach us about the 19th-century beginnings of the modern urban world?
6. Is Wordsworth correct to see rural life as superior to city life?

The Pastoral Tradition

We should keep in mind that the typical conventions of the pastoral tradition, begun in the classical period by the Sicilian Theocritus and carried on by the Roman Virgil and emblematic of such works as Phillip Sidney's *Arcadia* and Matthew Arnold's *Thyrsis*, are rather formal in nature:

- Idealized rural life of shepherds and shepherdesses.
- Rustic innocence, idleness, little actual shepherd-like work.
- Stresses the loves and sorrows of the shepherds.
- Individuals speak in courtly rather than natural language.
- Nature or natural objects may personify the shepherd's emotions.
- It tends to express the complex through the medium of the simple.

This last characteristic was most notably formulated by William Empson in his *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, and it suggests that the pastoral setting can move beyond the specific conventions of the tradition, yet still hold onto a certain idealization of the human condition or at least an examination of that condition within a genre that stresses stock conventions and that trades in these types as a way both to reflect and endear its readers to certain moral and aesthetic virtues.

There are other conventions that the pastoral may absorb, as well. The pastoral romance can also be seen to borrow in some versions another ancient habit of playing off the country and the city, with the country as a garden of peace, innocence, simplicity, and community over against the corrupt, hypocritical, back-stabbing urban world. 2) Ironically, the comic tradition of playing up the rustic bumpkin's ignorance and poor taste, ever gawking at the higher culture, can also be joined with this tradition of admirable innocence, yet 3) the theme of rural wisdom and skill in farming can also play a role in the pastoral setting, as does 4) the divinization of nature through the neo-pagan revival of the nineteenth-century.

Book Eighth [Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind]

8.1-61—The Graswere Fair is a small country event, yet it has greatness about it. Beginning by viewing it from the mountain is a particularly effective approach. The episode is clearly meant to contrast with the hellish St. Bartholomew's Fair in book seven.

8.62-118—His rural upbringing taught him early the love of humanity, as seen in his memory of the shepherd and his dog.

8.119-221—He makes an extended historical contrast between the Chinese Emperors gardens and his own native land. 8.149-158 offers something of Wordsworth's political philosophy. After 8.160, Wordsworth compares his truly pastoral region to the artificial pastoral conventions of Shakespeare and Spenser. His was a more stoic, less refined rural world, one that knew suffering and hardship first hand.

8.222-311—The Matron's Tale recounts the story of a shepherd and his son and the saving of the boy's life.

8.312-428a—After several allusions to Virgilian georgics, Wordsworth offers further reflections upon the rural setting of his youth and expands several meditations upon the shepherds of that country, as well as that of Goslar in Germany. 8.391bff. offers a meditation on the nobility of the common person.

8.428b-497—A defense of the reality of these idealizations of shepherds and humanity and how Nature taught him the nobility of humanity early on.

8.498-541—Another short catalogue of rural types and how these became inspiration for his poetic fictions. Yet these include the tales of death that accompany rural life.

8.542-586a—The foxglove, the copse, and the beauty outside his cottage all speak of the mystery of life that he can't quite name. The moment of the mother with her child amidst this scene is another example of Wordsworth's trust in sentimentalism.

8.586b-623—A solid world of images for his fictional creations.

[1850: 8.458b-475—The Coniston Water episode is another celebration of the natural, rural world.]

8.624-710—London like a great teacher instructs him in the vices and manners of humanity and almost robs him of his faith in humanity, but not quite.

8.711-769—Two extended passages on the shadows of human life—the first an extended allusion to Plato's cave analogy, and the second a defense of his sensation of human power (creativity and nobility) even in the city.

8.770-836—He still hopes despite all that the vice of London tried to rob him of. He echoes *Paradise Lost* 11.203-207 and the fallen Adam looking upon the horizon to suggest that some nobility of persons remains.

8.837-870—He ends with an urban scene of a man who loves deeply his dying child and transitions to the end of the book.

Discussion Questions for Book Eighth

1. What are some ways that Wordsworth seeks to critique and reposition the pastoral tradition?
2. What makes the shepherd a heroic ideal yet also the symbol of the common person?
3. Are the aside tales essential to book eight? Why and/or why not?
4. Is Wordsworth's faith justified? Why and/or why not?
5. What is the overall effect of his trust in sentimentality?
6. Does the structure of book eight hold together?