

The Prelude (William Wordsworth)

Summary

The first two books of *The Prelude* describe the speaker's early attachment to the natural beauty of his native Lake District, in the north of England. Here, nature appears as a benevolent but extremely powerful force. The speaker (who shares much with Wordsworth himself, but who can be seen as a distinct, imaginative persona in his own right) advances the pantheistic idea that God and nature are inseparable. He also argues that nature, having been established as an important part of his life early on, remains an ever-present element of his work and worldview. This in itself plays into another Romantic interest: childhood.

Wordsworth advances a typically Romantic idea that an individual's childhood influences and experiences continue to shape them throughout their lives. In Book Third, the speaker leaves home to attend Cambridge. He experiences a degree of culture shock as, separated from the rustic surroundings of his childhood, he confronts an atmosphere of pretension and inauthenticity. At the same time, he is thrilled to be in a place that once was home to his heroes, including poets like John Milton. In Book Fourth, the speaker returns home from Cambridge for summer vacation, reencountering the beloved landscape of his youth through newly appreciative and yet newly distant eyes. This book also contains a famous scene in which the speaker encounters a sickly soldier and helps him to a shelter for the night.

Book Fifth is altogether different from the previous four. Instead of focusing on the facts of Wordsworth's life, it is concerned with the ephemerality of mankind's great works of art when compared to the immortality of nature. The speaker is severely distressed by this mismatch, but also argues that books and poetry are one of the most suitable ways for people to express the strong emotions that nature can induce. In Book Sixth, the speaker quickly describes the end of his years at Cambridge, and introduces two important characters. One is his sister, Dorothy. The other is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to whom the book is addressed—for the first time, Wordsworth directly alludes to Coleridge's role as his intended audience. The speaker then describes a walking tour of the French Alps, which took place at the peak of the Revolution and was full of joyful celebration. Next, in Book Seventh, the speaker discusses a period when he was living in London. He found certain elements of London exciting, but was distressed by the city's crowdedness, anonymity, and distance from nature. In Book Eighth, rather than describe new events, the speaker looks back and explains in more detail how an early exposure to nature shaped his poetic sensibilities, and how the harsh landscapes of Britain offer a certain inspiration distinct from the pleasant, warm nature of the Mediterranean.

Book Ninth describes the speaker's move to France, where he befriended a pro-Revolution soldier and witnessed firsthand the injustices that led to the overturning of the monarchy. He recounts in detail the story of a young couple torn apart by the social conservatism and hierarchy of pre-revolutionary France. In Book Tenth, the speaker grapples with the radical phase of the French Revolution, denouncing the violence of Robespierre and his allies, and remembering fondly the moment when he learned that Robespierre had died. Continuing this thread in Book Tenth, the speaker describes how his political disillusionment led him to mistakenly embrace an overly skeptical, self-satisfied rationalist philosophy. Here, Wordsworth also mentions Coleridge's departure for Italy, where he is spending time in order to rehabilitate his health. Book Thirteenth describes the process by which the speaker recovered his connection with nature and his lively imagination after his flirtation with severe

rationalism. It recounts the speaker's return to the rural areas where he grew up, which enabled this recovery of imaginative power. Finally, Book Fourteenth articulates a philosophy of love in which the love of individual people and universal, divine love work in conjunction. It also acknowledges those who have helped Wordsworth, from his sister to Coleridge to a friend who helped fund his writing. In this concluding book, Wordsworth voices the hope that his poem will stand the test of time and that its writing will prove to have been justified.

The Prelude Summary and Analysis of Book First

Summary

This autobiographical epic poem begins with the speaker (a young Wordsworth) returning from a city to the rural area he calls home. Since this work is autobiographical, we can guess that this area is England's idyllic Lake District, where Wordsworth grew up. He is relieved and thrilled, even comparing the crowded city to a place of captivity. The liveliness and intensity of nature seem to awaken a similar creative aliveness within the young poet, and he feels as if the streams and branches around him are both pointing him towards a certain poetic destiny, and reflecting that which is already inside of him. In search of experiences in nature—both because he enjoys them and because they sharpen his instincts as a writer—the child Wordsworth embarks on a series of explorations. These explorations take place in the physical world, but they also symbolize and bring about the speaker's growth as a human being and as a poet. Indeed, the speaker deliberately sets goals that he thinks might help him grow as an artist. He wants to capture meaningful, important things in his work, but they don't always feel available to him. At the same time, he isn't able to bring himself to sacrifice poetry for something more mundane and respectable. When he considers his fitness to be a poet, the speaker is pretty satisfied. He feels that he has a "vital soul," a good understanding of important truths, and a solid store of images and anecdotes culled from the real world. But he's not always able to write about what he'd like. Sometimes he goes ahead and retells a famous mythical or historical narrative, and other times he writes about his own life. But what he'd really like is to write, movingly and evocatively, about universal everyday experiences. However, the speaker is still too young to really know how to do this. He can't yet separate selfish impulses from intuitive longings, or fear from wise cautiousness. He needs to separate himself from the petty ambitions of human society, embracing immersion in nature in order to write the way he wants.

The speaker describes the beloved river Derwent, flowing near his home throughout his childhood. This forms his earliest memory of nature, but, he recalls, as he grew older he became more adventurous. He wandered off among the forests and hills, occasionally getting into trouble. He remembers plundering birds' nests and once even falling off the side of a cliff, hanging on for dear life. Now, in retrospect, it seems as if nature gave him additional challenges and experiences in order to aid his artistic development. In one especially intense memory, the speaker recalls, he stole a small boat and steered it beneath some massive rock formations. These formations affected him deeply, inspiring a kind of awe, horror, and curiosity long after he returned the boat. Reflecting on that sublime experience, the speaker contrasts the mundane meaninglessness of the man-made world with the inexplicable, nearly divine grandeur of nature. At the same time, he remembers calmer, less earth-shattering moments in the natural world or in humble rural cottages, like ice-skating and playing card games. The speaker claims that he felt remarkably sensitive and connected to natural beauty as a child. Finally, the speaker apologizes for his long-windedness, saying that he hoped to

attain self-improvement by reflecting on the past. Regardless, reminiscing has made him feel mentally sharper and prepared him to launch into the full story of his life.

Analysis

One important thing to keep in mind while reading the *Prelude* is its autobiographical nature. The work is essentially a memoir in blank verse, and while its focus is primarily artistic rather than informational, it does draw on Wordsworth's actual experiences. The poet was born in 1770 in the Lake District, a region of England known for its pastoral beauty. Indeed, the young Wordsworth would likely have spent much of his childhood playing outside, just as he describes in the poem. This idyllic childhood ended somewhat abruptly, with the successive deaths of Wordsworth's parents in 1778 and 1783. It may in part be because of these tragic, sudden losses that the first book of the *Prelude* is so tinged with nostalgia and so concerned with the slippery nature of time and memory.

We can watch this concern with the movement of time play out by tracking the speaker's use of past and present tense. Book First begins in the present tense, with the speaker describing his return from the city as if it is happening in the present moment—as if he narrates, not as an adult, but as his childhood self. But in line 55, we forge ahead into the future, and the speaker is revealed to be describing his childhood from a distance. For a while, he continues to narrate in past tense, using the present only when comparing his state as an adult to his distant childhood. But then the present returns in a more ambiguous way. In statements like "When...I through myself make rigorous inquisition, the report/is often cheering"—a description of the speaker's practice of artistic self-evaluation—it's not altogether clear whether he is using present tense to vividly describe his childhood, or whether he's speaking about his current, adult self. Both readings are possible, and this ambiguity makes sense in the context of the narrative arc being established. Both the young and the older versions of the speaker are engaging in acts of adventure exploration in order to heighten their sensitivities and sharpen their mental acuity, all in the service of becoming a better poet. The child speaker explores nature in order to accomplish these goals, while the adult speaker explores his own memories in order to do so.

In other words, here Wordsworth establishes a kind of triangular relationship between childhood, nature, and poetry. Childhood and the natural world are deeply linked, such that childhood is portrayed as a period of authenticity, rusticity, and connection to the earth. Such a portrayal of childhood is common in the works of Wordsworth and other Romantic poets. In fact, some critics have argued that the Romantics were instrumental in inventing now-ubiquitous archetypes of the innocent, simple child. But on the one hand, the speaker doesn't describe his love of nature as a mere side effect of his youth. Instead, he recounts being unusually sensitive to the natural world. This sensitivity, he suggests, comes from his naturally poetic temperament. The poet, Wordsworth argues, is in some ways like the child (or, as he writes in line 146, like the lover)—both are disconnected from the artificiality of urban adult life, and linked instead to the sublimity of nature. Nature here isn't a passive object to be admired. Instead, it's almost conscious, and even seems to embody the divine. For instance, the cliffs around which the speaker steers his stolen boat loom "like a living thing," judging and watching.

To be a poet, then, isn't simply a trade or a hobby. At least for this speaker, it is a near-religious vocation, and a state as all-consuming as childhood. Of course, this doesn't mean that having a poetic temperament always means writing good poems. Rather, it means that

writing good poetry goes far beyond honing a craft, and involves cultivating one's wisdom, sensitivity, and receptivity to beauty starting at a young age. We can see that, between the 1805 and 1850 versions of the *Prelude*, Wordsworth sought to emphasize the hard work of creating poetry: he adjusts the phrase "such glorious work" to "such arduous work." The speaker's poetic temperament means he's always going to produce poetry, but without putting in that arduous work, much of it is derivative and uninteresting. Sometimes these uninteresting poems are nostalgic retellings of "some British theme," disconnected from real life. Sometimes they're self-indulgently autobiographical. But the speaker really wants to produce work that ties together universal themes and specific experiences. In order to do this, he believes, he must combine the wisdom and discipline of adulthood with the emotion and instinct of a nature-infused childhood. Furthermore, the speaker describes poetry as deeply personal. Whether it's autobiographical or not, it draws on its writer's beliefs, experiences, and ability to understand the surrounding world. These links between poetic sensitivity, childhood, nostalgia, and nature will return again and again throughout the *Prelude*, just as they do in so much of Wordsworth's writing.

Summary and Analysis Book 1: Introduction — Childhood and School-Time

Summary

It is a magnificent autumn day. The poet has, by his own account, been too long pent-up in London and only now has managed to return to the beloved Lake District where he spent his childhood and adolescence. It is difficult to fix his age as the poem opens because time constantly shifts backward and forward throughout the narrative. The start of Book 1 finds Wordsworth speaking from a mature point of view. The body of the poem employs flashbacks to describe the development of the poetic mind during youth. This material is amalgamated with the poet's adult views of philosophy and art (those views held during the writing and endless revision of *The Prelude*, roughly from 1799 until 1850).

Wordsworth experiences relief in coming back to nature. He immediately identifies spiritual freedom with the absence of the encumbrances of civilization. Feelings of irresponsible freedom and lack of purpose quickly give way to a prevision of an impending period of optimism and creativity. In the delicious quiet, Wordsworth suddenly sees in his mind's eye the cottage of the landlady with whom he stayed as a schoolboy. He recalls that even then he had intimations of his future greatness.

His wish to create some profound work of art calls for a re-disciplining of his mind, which has recently been dulled by the artificiality of society. He mentions in passing the typical moodiness of the poet in likening him to a lover. In assessing his faculties, Wordsworth finds he has the three necessary ingredients for creativity: a vital soul; knowledge of the underlying principles of things; and a host of painstaking observations of natural phenomena. He rejects historical and martial themes, as well as mere anecdotes from his personal history. He is searching instead for "some philosophic song that cherishes our daily life." He is next assailed by doubts about the maturity of his views. If such views change radically after he has recorded them, his analysis of them will be worthless. In his indecision, he feels that if he reviews the ideas he formed in childhood and traces their history up until early manhood, he will find whether they have had any lasting truth and permanence.

He recollects some of his childhood activities, among them river-bathing (he sported like a naked savage) and climbing and robbing of birds' nests while wandering at night. In a discussion of simple education, he stresses the importance of reaction on the part of the child to every action upon it by its natural environment. In this way, nature develops morality in the child. Wordsworth sets the tone of the poem by speaking religiously of nature. He sees it as a great and awesome intelligence. Occasionally he communicates his mood to the reader by employing natural objects as symbols of his feelings.

In a celebrated passage filled with much color, the poet describes how as an adolescent, he stole a boat and rowed one night across Ullswater Lake. At the climax of this experience, he imagined that a peak beyond the lake became a presence which reared up and menaced him because of his misdeed in taking the boat. He confides that for some time thereafter he struggled to clarify a conception of pantheism which had been teasing his brain. He addresses what he terms the spirit of the universe. He decries the artifacts of civilization and praises enduring things — life and nature.

In a more literal section, he tells of his youthful pastimes and mentions winter ice games with a group of companions and games of cards and tick-tack-toe in front of the peat fire. But above all, he tried to be outdoors at all times of the year so that nature could be unstinting in its education of him. He is particularly troubled when he remembers that certain vistas in Westmoreland — particularly the sea — brought him great pleasure, though he had no prior experience of the same kind of joy. Since beauty is eternal, he may have learned to love such sights during a previous existence of his soul. He then proceeds to develop a romantic theory of aesthetics. He maintains that certain individuals create great art because, in the midst of mundane events, they sense the magical urgency in everyday objects. Insignificant things take on a critical meaning over and above their common and instrumental role. They suggest to the practitioner of the fine arts, the clergyman, and the idealistic philosopher that the universe is of vast and harmonious design. The layman, on the other hand, is insensible to this oneness of all things, and the idea must be communicated to him.

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