

Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey

by William Wordsworth



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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

The eighteenth century was a time of revolution; the French Revolution, especially, was supposed to usher in a new era of enlightenment, brotherhood, and individual freedom. The artistic movement that arose in Europe in reaction to the events of this time is called Romanticism, and it is characterized by a stressing of emotion and imagination, as opposed to the emphasis on classical forms that was important to previous artists. In England, the major Romantic poets were Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, and John Keats. These poets took up the revolutionary ideas of personal and spiritual emancipation through language that is often bold and simple, like the speech of the common people of England.

Romantic poetry frequently focuses on images of nature, which is viewed as a force that expresses sympathy with human beings.. Romanticism also features supernatural events and includes melancholy settings, such as deserted castles or monasteries on lonely hillsides.

A concern for human society also marks the early English Romantics. Blake describes a time when Albion (England) will be free from oppression and injustice, and all men will enter into a new age and a new heaven on earth. Wordsworth despises the ugliness of the expanding cities and urges a return to a spiritual home in nature. Later Romantic poets, though, especially Keats, focus more on the intense emotions and deep paradoxes of human existence.

Despite the variety of opinion and style within English Romantic poetry, one idea remains central to the movement: Individual experience is the primary source of truth and knowledge. In fact, some recent scholars have attributed the modern ideas of personality to the Romantic poets, whose focus on personal, emotional, and subjective experience may have given rise to our notions of individuality.

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

The Romantic Movement was a literary, artistic, and intellectual movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It began as a reaction against the rigid conventions—artistic, social, and political—of the Enlightenment and asserted the power and the value of the individual.

Romanticism stressed strong emotion and the individual imagination as the ultimate critical and moral authority. The Romantic poets, therefore, felt free to challenge traditional notions of *form*. They likewise found themselves abandoning social conventions, particularly the privileges of the aristocracy, which they believed to be detrimental to individual fulfillment.

Because Romanticism is, at its core, a rebellion *against* rigid standards of form, taste, and behavior, it is difficult to establish a set of standards to *define* Romanticism. It is possible, however, to point out some common motifs that offer an overview of what the Romantic poets believed and tried to accomplish in their poetry.

The politics of the Romantics:

- The Romantics were, for the most part, disheartened liberals.
- The successful revolution of the American colonies against the oppressive British crown and the developing revolution in France were exciting to the Romantics.
- Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley all lost heart, however, because of the Reign of Terror in France and the rise of Napoleon as the French Emperor.
- The Romantic focus on the imagination was a direct response to eighteenth-century rationalism.

The psychology of the Romantics:

- The nature of experience: its duality and fleeting quality were of great interest to the Romantics. Notice Blake's contrast between Innocence and Experience, the role of memory in Wordsworth's work, Shelley's lamenting the passing of an experience, and Keats' assertion that the *imagined* experience is better than the actual, in that it will never end.
- Beauty was to be found in Nature, not in man-made objects or concepts.
- The Romantics sought solitude in Nature, believing that the key to all emotional healing could be found in Nature.
- Nature imagery is the most predominant feature of Romantic literature.

- The concept of a pantheistic Nature (God exists in all things) became almost a religion for Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats.
- In the “religion” of the Romantics, virtue was exemplified by being true to one's nature while “sin” occurred when denying one's own nature or forcing someone else to conform to a foreign code of principles or behavior (in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake wrote: “One law for the Lion and Ox is oppression”).

The Romantic Sense of Beauty

- While the literature of the Enlightenment focused on the hero and the high-ranking socialite, the Romantics celebrated the commoner, the laborer, and the “underprivileged.”
- Eighteenth-century esthetics had favored the highly ornate and artificial (as epitomized by Baroque music and architecture), but the Romantics strove to emphasize beauty in simplicity and plainness.

The Byronic Hero

Taking into consideration the personal traits the Romantics found most admirable—passionate conviction, absolute individualism and independence, a disregard for restrictive authority and the outmoded or unjust laws it represents—it follows that the Romantic notion of the hero would be just such a person. Byron's most famous characters, *Manfred*, *Childe Harold*, and *Don Juan*, typify this type of hero, as did Byron himself. Thus, the Romantic hero came to be known as the Byronic Hero.

William Wordsworth

We have within ourselves
Enough to fill the present day with joy,
And overspread the future years with hope.

—William Wordsworth
The Recluse

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH WAS BORN on April 7, 1770, in the Lake District of England. After the death of their mother in 1778 and their father in 1783, Wordsworth and his siblings were brought up under the guardianship of their uncles. Wordsworth would later describe frequent bouts of depression and persistent grief for the deaths of his parents and a subsequent separation from his brothers and sisters. As adults, he and his sister Dorothy would become inseparable friends.

Wordsworth toured France in 1791 and fell in love with Annette Vallon, with whom he had a daughter, Caroline. Wordsworth would most likely have married Annette, but the Revolution in France made it impossible for him to stay there, and growing conflict between France and England forced him to take his family home to England. He did, however, support Annette and Caroline for the rest of their lives.

Like William Blake, Wordsworth had been an early supporter of the French Revolution, but was disheartened by the horrible excesses of the Reign of Terror.

He met Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1793, and the two poets became close friends. Together, Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems that many credit as beginning the English Romantic movement. In *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge attempted to depart from the highly eloquent and stylistic works of the Enlightenment and develop a new form, based on the “real language of men.” The collection includes Wordsworth's “Tintern Abbey,” and Coleridge's “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

By 1804, Wordsworth's friendship with Coleridge had begun to deteriorate, largely due to Wordsworth's concern about Coleridge's opium addiction and Coleridge's disillusionment that Wordsworth was losing the liberal idealism that had once driven his work. The poets' friendship, especially their collaboration on the “Lyrical Ballads,” is explored in the 2000 film, *Pandaemonium*.

Wordsworth expected to be named England's Poet Laureate in 1813, but lost the title to his friend Robert Southey (who is best known today as the author of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”). When Southey died in 1843, Wordsworth was finally appointed to the post.

After his death on April 23, 1850, Wordsworth's widow published the long autobiographical “poem to Coleridge” under the title *The Prelude*. It did not meet with either critical or commercial success on its original publication, but it is now generally regarded as Wordsworth's masterpiece.

Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798

From *Lyrical Ballads*

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a sweet inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb
The wild green landscape. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire
The hermit sits alone.

Though absent long,
These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life;
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,

In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened:— that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—
In darkness, and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee
O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts

That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. And so I dare to hope
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first
I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led; more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by,)
To me was all in all.— I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this

Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur: other gifts
Have followed, for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. 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, both what they half-create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Nor, perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me, here, upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! And this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold

Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain winds be free
To blow against thee: and in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; Oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,

Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance—
If I should be, where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence—wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came,
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake.