

In the following essay, the writer analyzes William Wordsworth's poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." As you read the essay, write down answers to the numbered analysis questions that accompany it. You can find the poem beginning on page 552 of your *Holt Literature and Language Arts* textbook.

from *Poetry for Students*

Memory: William Wordsworth and "Tintern Abbey"

by Derek Furr

Imagine yourself five years from now. You've received an invitation to your high school reunion and, feeling a little anxious and nostalgic, you arrive early to walk around your old stomping grounds. You wander into the empty gym, where you played your first varsity ball game; you sit in the back of your old chemistry class, staring at the board that once held puzzling equations; you stroll through a courtyard where you held the hand of someone you thought you couldn't live without. Slowly you recollect how you felt as a teenager, how you saw the world around you—who was important, what made a difference. Doubtless you'll carry both fond and troubling memories of high school, and when you return, both will re-surface at the sites where they originated. But when five years have passed, the emotions of your teen years may prove difficult to recover. Revisiting your past, you may be surprised not so much by

1. How does the writer attempt to engage audience interest? Who do you think his intended audience is?

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the changes in your old school—the gym will be in the same spot, the cafeteria will serve the same mysterious foods. Rather, as you recall your former self, walking through that courtyard, holding that hand, you may be struck—with melancholy and wonder—by how much you have changed.

William Wordsworth returned to the Wye valley in July 1798, five years after he had first toured the region with his sister, Dorothy. As he looks at the valley, through the lens of memory, he sees himself—both as he once was, and as he is now. With his “Lines,” Wordsworth attempts to make sense of the changes he has undergone, and, in the process, he offers some interesting insights into the machinery of memory and the Romantic lyric.

The specific setting of Wordsworth’s poem is clearly important to him. Indeed, in the very title of his poem, he announces the time and place of his return visit, and lets us know where he is positioned in the landscape that he describes. He sits in a specific spot, a “few miles above” an abandoned abbey in the valley of the river Wye; thus he has a broad perspective on the landscape he will describe. As he composes the poem (or so he claims), he is reclined “under [a] dark sycamore.” It is mid-July, the day before Bastille Day,¹ and three times in the space of two lines Wordsworth asserts that “five years have past” since he last visited. Those were five tumultuous² years in European history and in Wordsworth’s life, and it is as though he has longed to return to this spot above Tintern Abbey. He is nostalgic, in a contemplative,³ reflective mood.

Like the many topographical or landscape poems that preceded “Tintern Abbey” in the 18th century, Wordsworth’s poem goes on to describe the scene in detail, appealing to our eyes and ears—the sound of “rolling” waters, the sublime⁴ impressiveness of “steep and lofty cliffs,” and so forth. But note how often Wordsworth repeats the first person pronoun, “I”—“I hear/These waters,” “I behold,” “repose,” “view,” and “see.” Wordsworth’s description emphasizes his personal engagement or

1. **Bastille** (bas•têl') Day: commemoration of the 1789 siege and destruction of the Bastille, a Paris prison, during the French Revolution.

2. **tumultuous**: turbulent; uneasy.

3. **contemplative**: thoughtful.

4. **sublime**: awe-inspiring.

2. What background information does the writer provide? Why do you think this information is important to understanding the poem?

3. How does the writer explain Wordsworth's repetition of the pronoun “I”?

involvement with the landscape; he is concerned with how the vista⁵ affects him. Likewise, we should be concerned with how his point of view affects the vista. Critics have often noted—see, for example, Marjorie Levinson’s *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems*—that Wordsworth does not depict the Abbey and the valley as it really appeared in 1798. The abbey was ruined and overgrown, and the valley had been scarred by the industrial revolution. To some extent, Wordsworth sees what he wants to see—an idyllic⁶ landscape. Looking down on the valley through the lens of memory, much as you might look back on your old school five years from now, he sees a mixture of the present and the past.

With stanza two, it becomes clear that “Tintern Abbey” is not so much about the landscape of the Wye valley in 1798 as it is about the landscape of memory—Wordsworth’s memory. And *that* landscape is natural and harmonious. During his five years’ absence from the valley, Wordsworth suggests, the tranquil environs of Tintern Abbey have been constantly present with him, in the “beauteous forms” stored in his memory. Notice the contrasts that Wordsworth establishes between civilization and nature, the “din/Of towns and cities” and the “murmur” of the Wye river, the “fretful stir” and “fever of the world” and the peaceful meandering of the “sylvan⁷ Wye!” When Wordsworth has been troubled with the ways of the “unintelligible world,” he asserts, remembering nature has not only brought him peace but has also given him insight “into the life of things.” Through an act of memory—specifically, through reflecting upon natural scenes—Wordsworth discovers a spirit that connects all life.

Just as Wordsworth has returned often to the Wye in memory, so he would recur frequently to this theme in his early and middle-period poetry. “Tintern Abbey” purports⁸ to record a moment of revelation, when Wordsworth suddenly realized that nature and acts of memory had given him insight into the life of things. But fond memories alone do not lead him to this discovery. Think again about returning to your high school, several years from now. Your school fight song probably won’t stir you like it once did. You’ll probably be more

4. What key point does the writer address in this paragraph?

5. **vista:** view or scene.

6. **idyllic** (i•dil’ik): pleasant; simple.

7. **sylvan** (sil’væn): associated with the forest.

8. **purports:** claims.

responsible, but also have more responsibilities. Wordsworth waxes⁹ melancholy as he recalls how enthusiastic and engaged he was with nature on his previous visit to the Wye. Again he sets up a contrast, here between the pure emotion of youth and the rarefied contemplativeness of adulthood. In lines 76 and following, he mourns the loss of that passionate attachment to nature. However, as a “thoughtless youth,” he maintains, he could not have seen into the “life of things,” for such a discovery requires thoughtfulness, reflection. Perhaps the most important passage in “Tintern Abbey” occurs at the moment that Wordsworth makes his discovery: “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,/Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power/To chasten and subdue.” Wordsworth has lost his youth, has seen five more years pass, has felt the sorrows of others and the “fretful stir” of the world. But becoming acquainted with sorrow and loss has given him the power to sympathize with others and with nature. Note how deliberately the lines are set forth, with measured phrasing and frequent pauses, and how the “music” is carefully qualified. These are “thoughtful” lines, and the spirit that Wordsworth has discovered “impels/All thinking things.”

5. How does the writer explain the complex ideas expressed in the quotation? What literary elements does he point out?

Up to this point in “Tintern Abbey,” we have watched Wordsworth move from nostalgia for a lost perspective on nature to joy in a new one. Uttered in the present tense, at a specific time and place, “Tintern Abbey” appears to record Wordsworth’s discovery “as it happens.” Robert Langbaum has called such poems a “poetry of experience”; in the Romantic period lyric, Langbaum maintains, the poet always makes a discovery over the course of writing the poem and engaging with his/her subject.

As readers of the poem, we too experience this discovery. In “Tintern Abbey,” there is actually a character who represents us—Wordsworth’s younger sister, Dorothy, who is the “Friend” addressed in the final stanza of the poem. Dorothy’s significance in William Wordsworth’s life and writing cannot be overstated. Their affection for each other was powerful; many have argued that Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems¹⁰ are actually about his sister. Often she plays the

9. waxes: grows; becomes.

10. Lucy poems: a series of poems written by Wordsworth in 1799, which discuss themes of love and loss.

classical role of muse in his verse. And many of his poems, most famously “Resolution and Independence,” are lyrical renderings of Dorothy’s journal entries about experiences she and William shared. In the final stanza of “Tintern Abbey,” we learn that Dorothy is with William (at least in spirit) as he speaks this poem, just as we have been. He sees his former self in Dorothy: “in thy voice I catch/The language of my former heart, and read/My former pleasures in the shooting lights/Of thy wild eyes.” Therefore, he advises her to take his discovery to heart, and in lines that echo a spiritual benediction,¹¹ instructs her to have faith that nature will always provide solace in hard times and fresh insight into the meaning of life.

Curiously, however, the tone of this final stanza shifts from confidence to anxiousness. Wordsworth’s advice that Dorothy not forget “Nature” shifts to a plea that Dorothy (and perhaps we the readers) not forget him. Note the interplay of “remember” and “forget” in the final lines of Wordsworth’s address. Again, memory is an essential concern of “Tintern Abbey.” *How* we remember the past was a subject of the early stanzas; *why* we remember it is a question raised by Wordsworth’s desperate plea “Nor wilt thou then forget.” An important reader of Wordsworth, Paul DeMan, has suggested that in the passing of his youthful frivolity¹² and in the “still, sad music of humanity,” Wordsworth has recognized his own mortality. Perhaps the impetus¹³ behind Wordsworth’s final address to Dorothy and to us, therefore, is his desire for a kind of immortality. Just as he would carry the “beauteous forms” of the Wye valley with him always and draw on them for comfort, so he would want Dorothy and us to carry his lines in our hearts and minds. How we remember Wordsworth now differs from how Dorothy and her contemporaries saw him in 1798, and how we will think of him five years from now will surely differ from how we hold him at present. But “Tintern Abbey” has certainly given Wordsworth a kind of immortality, for neither he nor this poem has yet passed from our culture’s memory.

6. What change in tone does the writer identify? What evidence does he supply to show this change?

7. What closing thought does the writer leave his readers with? Evaluate whether this is an effective conclusion.

11. **benediction:** blessing.

12. **frivolity** (fri•vəl'ə•tē): lacking seriousness.

13. **impetus** (im'pə•təs): motivating force.