William Wordsworth
Cumberland, England
(1770-1850) 80

**CONTEXT**
- Parents died when boyhood: Grew-up in a rustic society – “pure communion with nature”
- He lived in France for a time – Annette Vallon = daughter, Caroline “It is beauteous evening, calm and free”
- The poetics he invented to embody his own understanding of the world, caused a revolution in English Lit.:
- **THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDHOOD IN THE ADULT PSYCHE & FROM THE IDEALIZAED REALM INTO THE IMPERFECT EARTH**
  - “Intimations of Inmortality” Ode

- Friend: Samuel Taylor COLERIDGE. Both: Lyrical Ballads (1798) “spontaneous overflow of emotions”
  - Feelings, simplicity, pleasure of Beauty over rhetoric, ornament and formality
  - Language of common people
  - Telling concrete stories of their lives “emotions recollected in a state of tranquility”
  - Poet surrendered + Emotion + Tranquility dissolved = Emotion remained in the poem
  - Timeless poems

**ROMANTIC ERA**
- John Keats
- P. B. Shelley
- Lord Byron (BR)
- Emerson (AM)
- Thoreau (AM)

**ANALYSIS**

**Lyrical Ballads**
- Poetry should be written of common speech, natural language
  - Access to emotions contained in memory
  - Principle of Poetry: Pleasure through: rhythmic, beautiful expression of feeling “The Naked and Native Dignity of Man”
  - His images & metaphors mix: natural scene, religious symbolism & relics of rustic childhood

**THEMES (3)**
1. The Beneficial Influence of Nature
   - Individual’s intellectual + spiritual development The Prelude
2. The Power of Human Mind
   - Memory + Imagination = Overcome Difficulty/ Pain
   - Transformative power available to all regardless individual’s class or background
   - Democratic view: individuality, uniqueness: rights of the individual
3. The Splendor of Childhood = Magnificent time of Innocence
   - Children appear to be a part of the natural world (rather than social)
   - “Intimations of Inmortality” through memory, adults can recollect the connection to nature of their youth

**MOTIFS (3)**
1. Wandering and Wanderers
   - Experience and participate in the vastness of the nature
   - “I wondered lonely as a cloud” recollecting his wanderings allows him to transcend present circumstances
   - The essence of poet memories permit the readers similar emotional own experiences
2. Memory
   - The hardness of the conemporary world
   - To reconnect with Nature and Childhood
   - Relation with Nature: an antidote to sadness, loneliness and dispar
   - Remembering: allows the poet to write
   - To compose with: Initial emotion + thoughts + feelings
3. Vision and Sight
   - Vision of great nature loveliness: memories
   - Moments of darkness solution: recollect memories
   - The power of sight: our mind’s eye “My heart leaps up”

**SYMBOLS**
- **Light** = Truth + Knowledge
  - Sunlight helps people see
  - Helps speakers to glimpse the wonders of the world
  - “Expostulation and Reply”
  - Remembrances of the past as a light iluminates his soul
- The Leech Gatherer in Resolution and Independence
  - Represents the strong-minded poet who perseveres in the face of: Poverty, obscurity and solitude. Inspiration hard to find sometimes

**“I WANDERED LONELY AS A CLOUD” Commentary**
- Wordsworth canon: subjects of nature and memory
- Plot extremely simple, musical eloquence
- The memory of the field of daffodils comforts him when he is lonely, restless...
- The daffodils personified as human beings dancing. Speaker = a cloud
- Four six-line stanzas, a quatrain-couplet rhyme scheme ABABCC
- Iambic tetrameter
**William Wordsworth** (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850) was born in Cockermouth, Cumberland, part of the scenic region in northwest England, the Lake District. His sister, the poet and diarist Dorothy Wordsworth, to whom he was close all his life, was born the following year. After the death of their mother, in 1778, Wordsworth was sent to a boarding school and Dorothy to live with relatives. After the Cockermouth school, he was sent to a school in Penrith for the children of upper-class families. It was at the school that Wordsworth was to meet the Hutchinsons, including Mary, who would be his future wife. Wordsworth made his debut as a writer in 1787 when he published a sonnet in *The European Magazine*. That same year he began attending St John's College, Cambridge, and received his B.A. degree in 1791. n November 1791, Wordsworth visited Revolutionary France and became enthralled with the Republican movement. He fell in love with a French woman, Annette Vallon, who in 1792 gave birth to their child, Caroline. Because of lack of money and Britain's tensions with France, he returned alone to England the next year, but supported her and his daughter as best he could. In 1802 Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, visited Annette and Caroline in Calais. The purpose of the visit was to pave the way for his forthcoming marriage to Mary Hutchinson, who bore him five children.

Wordsworth was deeply troubled by the rationalism he found in the works of thinkers such as William Godwin, Mary Shelley’s father, which clashed with his own softer, more emotional understanding of the world. In despair, he gave up his pursuit of moral questions. In the mid-1790s, however, Wordsworth’s increasing sense of anguish forced him to formulate his own understanding of the world and of the human mind in more concrete terms. The theory he produced, and the poetics he invented to embody it, caused a revolution in English literature. He became very close with another famous poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They were pioneers in the development of the Romantic Movement. Romanticism began in the mid-1700’s as a rebellion against the principles of classicism. Whereas classicism espoused the literary ideals of ancient Greece and Rome—objectivity, emotional restraint, and formal rules of composition that writers were expected to follow—romanticism promoted subjectivity, emotional effusiveness, and freedom of expression.

Wordsworth believed (as he expressed in poems such as the “Intimations of Immortality” Ode) that, upon being born, human beings move from a perfect, idealized realm into the imperfect, un-ideal earth. As children, some memory of the former purity and glory in which they lived remains, best perceived in the solemn and joyous relationship of the child to the beauties of nature. But as children grow older, the memory fades, and the magic of nature dies. Still, the memory of childhood can offer an important solace, which brings with it almost a kind of re-access to the lost purities of the past. And the maturing mind develops the capability to understand nature in human terms, and to see in it metaphors for human life, which compensate for the loss of the direct connection.

Freed from financial worries by a legacy left to him in 1795, Wordsworth moved with his sister Dorothy to Racedown, and then to Alfoxden in Grasmere, where Wordsworth could be closer to his friend and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Together, Wordsworth and Coleridge began work on a book called *Lyrical Ballads*, first published in 1798 and reissued with Wordsworth’s monumental preface in 1802.

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* represents a landmark moment for English poetry; it was unlike anything that had come before, and paved the way for everything that has come after. According to the theory that poetry resulted from the “spontaneous overflow” of emotions, as Wordsworth wrote in the preface, Wordsworth and Coleridge made it their task to write in the simple language of common people, telling concrete stories of their lives. According to this theory, poetry originated in “emotion recollected in a state of tranquility”; the poet then surrendered to the emotion, so that the tranquility dissolved, and the emotion remained in the poem.

In the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Here, Wordsworth argues that poetry should be written in the natural language of common speech, rather than in the lofty and elaborate dictions that were then considered “poetic.” He argues that poetry should offer access to the emotions contained in memory. And he argues that the first principle of poetry should be pleasure, that the chief duty of poetry is to provide pleasure through a rhythmic and beautiful expression of feeling— for all human sympathy, he claims, is based on a subtle pleasure principle that is “the naked and native dignity of man.”

This explicit emphasis on feeling, simplicity, and the pleasure of beauty over rhetoric, ornament, and formality changed the course of English poetry, replacing the elaborate classical forms of Pope and Dryden with a new Romantic sensibility. Wordsworth’s most important legacy, besides his lovely, timeless poems, is his launching of the Romantic era, opening the gates for later writers such as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and Lord Byron in England, and Emerson and Thoreau in America.

Following the success of *Lyrical Ballads* and his subsequent poem *The Prelude*, a massive autobiography in verse form, Wordsworth moved to the stately house at Rydal Mount where he lived, with Dorothy, his wife Mary, and his children,
until his death in 1850. Wordsworth became the dominant force in English poetry while still quite a young man, and he lived to be quite old; his later years were marked by an increasing aristocratic temperament and a general alienation from the younger Romantics whose work he had inspired. Byron—the only important poet to become more popular than Wordsworth during Wordsworth’s lifetime—in particular saw him as a kind of sell-out, writing in his sardonic preface to *Don Juan* that the once-liberal Wordsworth had “turned out a Tory” at last. Wordsworth was granted honorary degrees from both Durham University and Oxford University. Later, he became the Poet Laureate and considered the most important author in England. He died in 1850 at the age of 80.

**Themes**

Many of Wordsworth’s poems (including “Tintern Abbey” and “Daffodils”) deal with the subjects of childhood and the memory of childhood in the mind of the adult in particular, childhood’s lost connection with nature, which can be preserved only in memory. Wordsworth’s images and metaphors mix natural scenery, religious symbolism, and the relics of the poet’s rustic childhood—cottages, hedgerows, orchards, and other places where humanity intersects with nature. Nature provides the ultimate good influence on the human mind. All manifestations of the natural world elicit noble, elevated thoughts and passionate emotions. A good relationship with nature helps individuals connect to both the spiritual and the social worlds.

Humanity’s innate empathy and nobility of spirit becomes corrupted by artificial social conventions as well as by the squalor of city life. In contrast, people who spend a lot of time in nature retain the purity and nobility of their souls.

The speaker in “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798) relieves his loneliness with memories of nature- In the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explained the relationship between the mind and poetry. Poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquility”—that is, the mind transforms the raw emotion of experience into poetry capable of giving pleasure.

In Wordsworth’s poetry, childhood is a magical, magnificent time of innocence. Children form an intense bond with nature, so much so that they appear to be a part of the natural world, rather than a part of the human, social world. Their relationship to nature is passionate. As children age and reach maturity, they lose this connection but gain an ability to feel emotions. Through the power of the human mind, particularly memory, adults can recollect the connection to their youth.

**Motifs**

The speakers of Wordsworth’s poems are wanderers, solitary travellers who experience the vastness and beauty of the natural world. Moving from place to place also allows the wanderer to make discoveries about himself, allowing him to transcend his present circumstances.

Recollecting their childhoods gives adults a chance to reconnect with the visionary power and intense relationship they had with nature as children. In turn, these memories encourage adults to re-cultivate as close a relationship with nature as possible as an antidote to sadness, loneliness, and despair.

Throughout his poems, Wordsworth fixates on vision and sight as the vehicles through which individuals are transformed. In moments of darkness, the speakers recollect these visions, as in “Daffodils”. Here, the speaker daydreams of former jaunts through nature, which “flash upon that inward eye / which is the bliss of solitude” (21–22). The power of sight captured by our mind’s eye enables us to find comfort even in our darkest, loneliest moments. Elsewhere, Wordsworth describes the connection between seeing and experiencing emotion, as in “My heart leaps up” (1807), in which the speaker feels joy as a result of spying a rainbow across the sky. Detailed images of natural beauty abound in Wordsworth’s poems, including descriptions of daffodils and clouds, which focus on what can be seen, rather than touched, heard, or felt.

**Symbols**

Light often symbolizes truth and knowledge. Sunlight literally helps people see or experience. Generally, the light in Wordsworth’s poems represents immortal truths that can’t be entirely grasped by human reason.