

EXTRACT FROM THE PRELUDE by William Wordsworth

BACKGROUND TO THE POET

- ✓ Wordsworth had a rather troubled childhood. Losing both parents during his teenage years, he was separated from his siblings and sent to live with grandparents with whom he did not get along. To escape an unhappy house he spent most of his time outdoors exploring the countryside around him in Penrith.
- ✓ It was this time from his early years that created Wordsworth's love of nature which is a strong theme, which plays a prevalent role in the poem.
- ✓ Wordsworth was generally considered to be a romantic poet.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

- ✓ The poem was supposed to be part one of a three part epic poem, however Wordsworth never finished all three parts.
- ✓ He started writing the poem in 1798 aged 28. His wife published The Prelude after he died in 1950.
- ✓ The poem fits the 'romantic' genre as it includes aspects which i) embrace nature ii) embrace the supernatural iii) use ordinary language.

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

- ✓ This 'extract' from the wider poem, The Prelude, is written about an episode from Wordsworth's childhood. It describes a time when Wordsworth stole a boat and took it out across lake Ullswater in the lake district.
- ✓ The young Wordsworth starts off as quite arrogant, taking a joyride around the lake on a stolen boat.
- ✓ On the journey Wordsworth is humbled by nature. He sees a vast mountain which makes him realise just how powerful nature is.
- ✓ He returns the boat feeling overwhelmed and humbled.

THEMES

- ✓ Power of Man: Wordsworth starts off as arrogant, believing man is all powerful.
- ✓ Power of Nature: During the poem Wordsworth is humbled by the sheer power of nature.
- ✓ Memory: The poem is based on a real event which happened in Wordsworth's childhood.

COMPARISONS

Power of man	Power of nature	Memory
Ozymandias, London, My Last Duchess, Tissue, Storm on the Island	Exposure, Ozymandias, Tissue, Kamikaze, Storm on the Island	Poppies, War Photographer, Remains, The Emigree, My Last Duchess

FORM

- ✓ The extract can be seen to fit within the genre of an 'epic' poem. Epic poems typically involve a speaker describing an adventure featuring a 'hero'.
- ✓ In the extract, the 'adventure' can be seen to be Wordsworth's awakening to the power of nature. This was such an important part of Wordsworth's life.
- ✓ The 'hero' could be argued to be Wordsworth himself, finally accepting the power of nature, or, it could be seen to be nature. Arguments could be made either way.

STRUCTURE

- ✓ The poem is written as one long verse with no breaks or pauses. The impact of this it to overwhelm the reader, reflecting how Wordsworth was overwhelmed by nature.
- ✓ The poem has no rhyme scheme, which represents the fact that the speaker is in conversation.
- ✓ The rhythm of the poem is iambic pentameter, with every other syllable being stressed, this gives the poem a marching sort of beat representing the journey Wordsworth is on during the 'adventure'.

LANGUAGE / QUOTES

- ✓ Wordsworth used very simple, everyday language which reinforces the fact that the poem is a spoken 'story'.
- ✓ References to 'her' at the beginning of the poem are to nature. Wordsworth is saying nature encouraged him to take the boat out to explore; it leads him... this is an important point!
- ✓ Personifying nature as female was his way of making her appear weaker, as in those days females were considered the weaker gender.
- ✓ Enjambment is also used frequently at the beginning of the poem. This suggests the poet's overwhelming urge to blurt out the story. It suggests excitement and the inability to properly order thoughts. It also adds to the overwhelming effect nature has on him.
- ✓ Wordsworth describes stealing the boat as an 'act of stealth'. This implies he knew it was wrong, it makes it appear sly and sneaky.
- ✓ Combined with the line 'Proud of his skill' when he describes his rowing this portrays him as proud and arrogant, taking what he wants without consequence.
- ✓ Describing his journey through the water Wordsworth uses strong, descriptive imagery, "circles glittering", "sparkling light". This shows the pleasure he was experiencing but tinges it once again with arrogance.
- ✓ The journey's effect on Wordsworth becomes clearer when he describes the 'little boat' from the beginning of the poem to an 'elfin pinnacle'. This gives the journey a mystical quality, showing he has become enchanted by nature. This strengthens the 'romantic' genre of the poem by introducing a supernatural element. Nature is leading him on a magical journey.
- ✓ However, when confronted with the huge craggy mountain (which he had thought to be much smaller) he is shocked. The sheer size and dominance of the mountain makes him realise that he does not know everything, what he thought he knew (that the mountain was much smaller) was wrong. It makes him realise how minute, and unimportant human life is. This links back to the fact that 'she' encouraged him to take the boat. It shows nature teaching him a lesson.
- ✓ Having used personification throughout the poem to describe nature, he refers to the mountain as 'it'. Where he previously had the ability to describe things as he wished, this power has left him.
- ✓ After his realisation the language in the poem changes dramatically, from descriptive imagery, to basic, repetitive ("no") and simple. His arrogance and power have deserted him and he is no longer able to express himself fully, he is overwhelmed and in shock.
- ✓ The closing lines of the poem show a scared, humbled boy who returns the boat to where he found it. The language is vague and reflects the enormity of his experience.