Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)

POEM TEXT

One summer evening (led by her) I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cove, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon's utmost boundary; far above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my bark,—
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

SUMMARY

One summer night (guided by nature) I came upon a boat that was tied to a willow tree in a small, rocky bay. This was where it was usually kept. Immediately I untied the boat's chain, got in and pushed off into the lake. It was a sneaky act that gave me a mix of pleasure and worry. Mountain echoes, like a voice, accompanied the movement of my boat. My oars left little circular ripples on either side of the boat, which were shining lazily in the moonlight until they all dissolved in the boat's wake into one long path of shining water. Now I was like someone who is proud of how good he is at rowing. In order to row in a straight line to my destination, I locked my gaze on a certain jagged mountain peak, the farthest point on the horizon. Above the peak were only stars and gray sky. My boat was an elf's boat. I vigorously lowered my oars into the silent lake, and as I lifted with each rowing motion, my boat pushed forward through the water like a swan. Then, from behind that jagged mountain peak (which, up until now, had been the highest point on the horizon) an even bigger peak, black and giant, appeared. As if it were a living, thinking being, this second mountain seemed to lift its head. I rowed and rowed. The mountain kept getting bigger and bigger, a scary shape that rose above me and blocked out the stars. It still seemed to me to be alive, to have its own motives and way of moving, just like a living creature. It seemed to pursue me. I was trembling with fright and so my oars began to shake as well. I turned around and rowed back through the noiseless water to the boat's dock, the willow tree. I left the boat docked there, and then walked back home through the fields in a somber and serious mood. After this experience, for many days, my thoughts were occupied by a dark, mysterious intuition that there were forms of existence that I knew nothing about. My thoughts were covered in a kind of darkness; you could call it solitude or empty abandonment. No recognizable shapes remained in my mind, no nice images of trees, sea, or sky. I couldn't picture the greens of fields. Instead, giant, powerful shapes—that were not alive in the same way that people are alive—moved slowly in my mind during the day. At night, these shapes gave me troubling dreams.

THEMES

THE MAGIC OF CHILDHOOD

The Prelude is a long autobiographical poem in which William Wordsworth depicts his own spiritual and poetic development. In this excerpt, Wordsworth recounts an episode from his childhood, when he stole a small boat and rowed into the middle of a lake at night. The speaker (who is usually identified with Wordsworth himself) remembers this adventure vividly, capturing the magic and wide-eyed intensity of childhood. This passage shows how children find such magic in the ordinary objects of the world.

For the speaker, childhood is magical in that it's full of beauty and terror that only children can perceive. This combination of feelings is captured by the phrase "troubled pleasure."

At first, this phrase seems to refer to the act of stealing the "little boat." Not only is the speaker stealing something, but he's probably not even supposed to be outside at this hour. Yet this feeling of breaking a whole bunch of rules only adds to the speaker's excitement—a kind of excitement particularly associated with youth. "[T]roubled pleasure," then, perfectly describes the thrill that a young child would feel sneaking out at night to row a stolen boat beneath the stars.

As the poem progresses, though, "troubled pleasure" takes on additional meanings. It summarizes the speaker's openness to the "spectacle" of the natural world, which is full of beauty and foreboding mystery. And as a child, the speaker is able to see beautiful *and* terrifying magic in ordinary objects.

The very act of rowing a boat is a spectacle infused with wonder, and the speaker remembers this experience almost as if it were a fairy tale. The speaker describes the "little boat" as an "elfin pinnace" (i.e., an elf's boat), and this phrase suggests how magical the moment feels. It's as if the speaker has been transported into a fairy tale, yet this isn't fantasy or make-believe. Instead, an object in the real world (the little boat) has revealed its own inner magic, or beauty, to the speaker, and the speaker believes in this magic with the wide-eyed acceptance of a child.

The speaker also finds magic in the surrounding environment. The boat creates "Small circles glittering idly in the moon, / Until they melted all into one track / Of sparkling light." It's the kind of scene one might imagine in a tale of King Arthur, an "elfin" boat ride over magical water. At the same time, though, this memory is rooted in the physical imagery of the scene. Again, then, the child's perceptiveness allows him to perceive the magic of the world around him.

In the second half of this excerpt, however, a mountain peak seems to chase the speaker ("Strode after me"). The scene has quickly changed from one of childlike wonder to childlike terror. The boy's active imagination has left him open to such experience—the scary side of the magic of childhood.

Such an experience of magic and terror, the poem implies, is a particular quality of youth. As a child, sneaking out at night to paddle a boat into the middle of a lake becomes a huge adventure. The boat, the lake, and the mountain seem filled with magic, and the vividness of this memory testifies to how this experience has stuck with the speaker long into adulthood. As this excerpt progresses, then, it captures the ways in which children are especially open to the beauty, adventure, and terror of the ordinary world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

NATURE VS. HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

One of topics Wordsworth often focuses on in his poetry is the relationship between the mind and the natural world. In fact, *The Prelude* as a whole was supposed to serve as an introduction to a longer philosophical poem about this relationship. This excerpt, which comes early in the speaker's journey, suggests that the natural world exceeds human understanding. As nature reveals itself to be a living, breathing entity separate from the speaker, the speaker is filled with fear and awe, discovering an attitude of humility in the face of nature's magnificence.

At the beginning of this excerpt, the speaker acts as if he is a part of nature. He personifies nature as a woman that teaches young minds, providing them with experiences that are sometimes gentle and sometimes difficult. By personifying nature in this way, the poem suggests nature is a kind of maternal figure. The speaker, then, is like nature's son. He's intimately bound with the natural world in a gentle, familial way. As the speaker venture outs onto the lake, he feels even more like part of the landscape: his boat "heav[es] through the water like a swan." That is, rather than feeling like an intrusion on this natural scenery, the speaker feels like a swan—like an animal that belongs in this environment.

In the second stanza of this excerpt, however, the living forms of nature begin to scare the speaker. They are vast, incomprehensible, and seem to pursue the speaker. Nature is alive, powerful, even terrifying. The speaker now starts to see himself as separate from nature. This experience centers around a mountain, which is described as a giant beast that "Upreared its head." At first, the speaker rows towards the mountain as if it's any other animal the speaker might play with. He views himself as an equal to the mountain, or perhaps even thinks he has mastery over it.

Yet as the speaker approaches the mountain, it becomes a "grim shape." Rather than being friendly, the mountain seems to have a "purpose of its own." Not only is it alive, but it has thoughts

and goals unknown to the speaker. In fact, the mountain now seems to be chasing the speaker! With "measured motion like a living thing, / [The mountain] Strode after me." The speaker gets scared, rows away, and walks home "in grave and serious mood." The mountain has gone from seeming familiar to being frightening and alien. This reaction suggests that the speaker has reached the limits of his relationship with nature. Rather than feeling like a part of it, he is scared of it.

At the end of this excerpt, the speaker reevaluates what he thought he knew about nature. Realizing that nature exceeds his knowledge, the speaker seems to adopt an attitude of greater humility. The image of the mountain troubles the speaker. The more he thinks about it, the more he realizes how little he knows about the mountain. It seems that "No familiar shapes / Remained." The mountain is totally beyond his grasp. Moreover, just as the mountain chased the speaker across the lake, it has even followed him into his own mind, where it becomes a "trouble to my dreams." The speaker no longer feels like a seamless part of nature. Rather, he is chased and haunted by it.

This suggests that in place of confidence, the speaker needs humility. While he starts out thinking he is one with nature and can go anywhere with ease, ultimately he learns that nature is an independent entity that exceeds his understanding. This leads him to have a more complex and uncertain relationship with nature.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

SOLITUDE AND SPIRITUAL INSIGHT

Wordsworth was interested in how solitude allows people to form a spiritual understanding of their existence. In this excerpt from *The Prelude*, solitude in the natural world has a profound spiritual effect on the speaker, leading him to discover the solitude *of his own mind*.

In his mind, he has a vision of "huge and mighty forms." Although the young speaker can't fully articulate the meaning of these mysterious forms, they can be interpreted as glimpses of the divine, something like God or a part of God. It is solitude, first in nature and then within his own mind, that leads the speaker to this spiritual vision.

The speaker's journey towards spiritual insight begins with solitude in nature, when he rows out over a moonlit lake. This solitude allows the speaker to be receptive to images and impressions that eventually inspire a spiritual vision. The absence of people leaves the speaker free to absorb the sights of nature without distraction.

As a result, the speaker has the powerful impression that a "huge peak" is chasing him. This is the kind of experience someone has when there's no one else around and the imagination can run wild. The peak will come to form the crux of the speaker's vision, and this initial solitude thus creates the conditions that eventually lead the speaker to an important spiritual experience.

The image of the mountain sticks with the speaker. In the solitude of his own mind, the speaker keeps going over this image until it becomes abstract and unfamiliar—less like an actual mountain and more like some kind of spirit. After this adventure, the speaker describes how "o'er my thoughts / There hung a darkness, call it solitude." This is a new kind of "solitude," then—that of his own mind. The speaker isn't alone with *nature*, but alone with *himself*. In this darkness, the speaker starts to have new perceptions.

More specifically, the speaker's memory of the peak transforms into strange new images. Eventually, "No familiar shapes / Remained." The speaker has *abstracted* from his own experience. In memory, the mountain has taken on new forms that can only be perceived by the speaker's mind. Soon, they will have a spiritual impact on the speaker.

These abstracted forms begin to suggest something like divinity—a glimpse of God that becomes visible only to the solitary mind. The speaker perceives "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men."

What exactly are these forms? That is the mystery that haunts the speaker. They seem to suggest a mysterious entity or entities. Such forms can be interpreted as representing the divine or spiritual nature of the world. It's as if seeing a mountain has led the speaker to see mountainous spirits in his mind. Or, put differently, it's as if a portion of God becomes visible to the speaker as a "mighty form" similar to a mountain peak.

That said, this passage doesn't necessarily refer to the God of any religion. Rather, the concept of God is helpful for getting a handle on the strange experience the speaker is having. Ultimately, the passage is about *what it's like* to have a spiritual insight in solitude—rather than attaching any definite interpretation to that insight. It's about a glimpse of some mysterious, abstract, and perhaps fundamental truth of the world, gained through solitary activities and intense personal contemplation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

One summer evening (led by her) I found

A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cove, its usual home.

Because this poem is just one part of a much longer work, it's worth delving into some context before breaking down these lines. Wordsworth began writing *The Prelude* in the 1790s and continued to tweak it for the rest of his life. In fact, although Wordsworth had finished the poem by the early 1800s, he continued to refine his language for another 50 years. The version used here is from his last known draft in the 1850s, generally considered to be his most polished version. *The Prelude* depicts Wordsworth's spiritual development from childhood into adulthood, as well as his growth as a poet.

The passage used in this guide is a single verse paragraph from Book 1 (i.e., Chapter 1) of the 14-book poem. In this book, Wordsworth introduces the poem and then narrates experiences from his early childhood. Here, the speaker (usually interpreted as Wordsworth himself) describes stealing a boat at night, an experience which then leads him to early spiritual insights.

This passage immediately begins by referencing nature as "her." In the verse paragraph preceding this one, the speaker personified nature as a kind of maternal figure that instructs the speaker. In fact, throughout *The Prelude*, solitary experiences in nature provide the speaker with valuable insights into his own mind and imagination. These insights also lead the speaker to a greater spiritual understanding of existence, where the human imagination and nature are intertwined. This passage, then, provides an early glimpse into this understanding, both for the young Wordsworth and for the reader.

The speaker is "led" by nature one night to "A little boat tied to a willow tree." The speaker literally means that, following his instincts and the natural landscape, he discovers where the boat is hidden. But by saying that nature "led" him there, he emphasizes how learning from nature involves a certain degree of passivity and openness. He has to treat the natural environment like a person that is communicating with him—that will help him uncover its secrets. Note that a "cove" is a small, secluded inlet. Here, the boat is tied to a willow tree as it floats in the shallows of a lake.

The form and meter of *The Prelude* is very important. It is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter (meaning there are five feet per line, each of which follows a da-DUM rhythm). The first line is a good example:

One sum- | mer eve- | ning (led | by her) | I found

Furthermore, as the first two lines exemplify, the poem is heavily enjambed. Wordsworth modeled this language after John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, written in the 1650s-1660s, which employs blank verse, long and intricate sentences as well as heavy enjambment.

The relationship between Wordsworth's and Milton's language is covered more fully in the Form section of this guide, but one of the most important elements of this relationship is how Wordsworth puts himself at the center of his poem. Whereas Milton wrote about characters from a religious story (the fall of Satan and the story of Adam and Eve), Wordsworth writes about himself. The pronoun "I" is always present, and it's always Wordsworth speaking. The images are all drawn from his own life. As Wordsworth sets the scene, then, he is reconstructing a memory of a place and event that is supposed to have really happened to him.

LINES 4-7

Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;

Immediately, the speaker unties the boat from willow tree, gets in, and pushes off from shore. The speaker describes this as an act of "stealth / And troubled pleasure."

"[S]tealth" means sneaky movement. The phrase "troubled pleasure" is richer and more complicated. At first, it seems mainly to capture the speaker's joy at breaking the rules by stealing the boat, and perhaps sneaking out of his house. It's the youthful feeling of going on a secret adventure that may be a little bit dangerous. More than anything, the phrase captures the innocence of childhood, when "troubled pleasure" could be something as gentle as rowing out into a lake at night.

Throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth emphasizes the role of solitude in his development, and this passage is no exception. The speaker is going on this adventure alone. At least, there are no other *humans* with him. He is, however accompanied by "the voice / Of mountain-echoes."

The word "voice" personifies these echoes, which are natural noises that filter down from the mountains, just as "her" personified nature in the previous section. As a result, the poem maintains a distinct feeling of nature as a living entity, someone or something that accompanies the speaker like a friend or family member.

As throughout the poem, the speaker continues to employ blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter. However, he varies it up slightly in lines 4-5:

Straight I | unloosed | her chain, | and step- | ping in
Pushed from | the shore. | It was | an act | of stealth

In both these lines, the speaker replaces the first iamb with a trochee (DUM-da). By beginning on a stress, the speaker the energetic actions these lines described: immediately jumping in the boat and pushing off from shore. Controlled variations like

these are how Wordsworth keeps his iambic pentameter alive.

At the same, he avoids varying it too much. Because the sentences are often long and are so heavily enjambed, it could be easy to lose track of meter if Wordsworth mixed it up too much. The constant meter, the rise and fall of iambs, is central to the feel of Wordsworth's language. Wordsworth composed his poetry in his head on long walks, so it's important to think of this language not just as something to read, but also to speak aloud or hear in one's head.

LINES 8-11

Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light.

As the speaker rows out into the middle of the lake, he watches the ripples from his boat glinting in the moonlight. He refers to his boat as "her" and later "She," a form of personification that is traditional in English.

This might be slightly confusing because the speaker earlier referred to nature as "her." This subtly suggests a relationship between these two entities, nature and the boat. The boat slides easily through the water as if it is a part of nature. The boat doesn't disrupt the lake, making the water choppy and noisy. If anything, it only adds beauty to the water, "leaving [...] / Small circles glittering idly in the moon." Since the speaker is rowing, he's facing backwards, able to watch the wake of the boat as it moves through the water. Watching these ripples, the speaker seems to be at one with this natural scene.

The imagery in this section is exceedingly beautiful and delicate. As the speaker remembers this scene from childhood, it's clearly an enchanting moment—almost magical. The kind of beauty one doesn't see everyday, but only in special moments ("spots of time," as Wordsworth famously calls such moments in Book 12).

Yet the magical quality of this scene isn't fantasy; it isn't artificial or whipped up in the imagination alone. Rather, this enchanting imagery is grounding in the speaker's experience of the real world—particularly the natural world.

The speaker's use of assonance and consonance adds to the beauty of this description:

> Leaving behind her still, on either side,
> Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
> Until they melted all into one track
> Of sparkling light.

Most prominently, the /l/ sound flows throughout these four lines. Technically known as a *liquid consonant*, /l/ thus perfectly captures the smooth and watery images here. Meanwhile, the alternation of long and short /i/ sounds seems to glitter, just like the reflected moonlight on the water. And the alliterating /m/ sounds of "moon" and "melted" captures the link between sky ("moon") and water ("melted"), which are so intricately bound in these lines.

LINES 11-16

But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon's utmost boundary; far above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.

In this section, the speaker employs a simile that's almost not a simile:

> But now, like one who rows,
> Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
> With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
> Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,

Here, the speaker compares himself to who rows confidently. To be like such a person, the speaker keeps his gaze locked on a mountain peak, so that he'll be able to row in a straight line. Here, the speaker is like such a person in that he basically *is* that kind of person—a confident rower.

By using this sort of simile, the speaker captures how children try to be like adults, and sometimes they really do seem like adults. As with so much of this passage, the speaker (as a young boy) seems to be on the cusp of becoming just a little more grown up, a little more experienced. At the same time, though, there's also a feeling that the speaker may be a little overconfident here. After all, he's still just a young boy rowing out on his own into the middle of a lake at night.

This simile has also the flavor of a Homeric simile, the kind of comparisons Homer used in his epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, and which Milton then imitated in *Paradise Lost*. By gesturing towards this literary tradition, Wordsworth reminds the reader that he is self-consciously writing an epic—though now it is the epic of one person's life, rather than of historical battles and mythological adventures.

Yet this sentence keeps some of the *bigness* of epic poetry, particularly as the speaker begins to describe the horizon. In order to row straight, the speaker keeps his eyes on the highest point on the horizon, "the summit of a craggy ridge"—a low-ish mountain peak. Since rowing requires the speaker to face backwards, that means he's rowing away from the ridge. As he watches the ridge, he takes in the grandeur of the sky:

> The horizon's utmost boundary; far above
> Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.

This grandeur, with its almost austere "grey," foreshadows the

speaker's experience with the "huge peak" that is about to come.

LINES 17-20

She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;

In line 17 the speaker increases the magic of the scene even more by describing his boat as "an elfin pinnace." A "pinnace" is a small boat, and "elfin" is the adjectival form of "elf." In other words, the speaker feels like he's in the kind of boat an elf could have. The speaker seems to feel like he's in a fairy tale.

Again, though, this fairy tale is grounded in concrete reality. The boat rows so smoothly, and the speaker is so excited to be in it, that it's *like* "an elfin pinnace." By becoming totally absorbed in the world around him, the young speaker—as only a child can—continues to find magic in it.

The word "lustily" doesn't mean "lustful" but heartily, vigorously, full of energy. In other words, the speaker is excitedly rowing. The perfect iambs here capture the rising and falling action of rowing:

> And, as | I rose | upon | the stroke, | my boat
> Went hea- | ving through | the wa- | ter like | a swan;

The smooth, steady meter mimics the movement of the swan-like boat.

By comparing the movement of his boat to a swan through this simile, the speaker seems to become part of the landscape. Rather than disturbing the lake, the speaker glides through it. His boat is like a swan, an animal, an element of the natural environment. In this comparison, as well as the comparison to "an elfin pinnace," the speaker captures how intensely he feels like a part of the natural environment. So far, he has moved through the natural world seamlessly. This is important to note, as it's about to change.

LINES 21-24

When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head.

This is the moment in the speaker's narrative when everything shifts. As the speaker keeps rowing away from the ridge, he starts to see what's behind it: a mountain peak, which becomes more and more visible. In this moment, the peak seems so big that the speaker has to call it "huge" twice: "a huge peak, black and huge." This diacope, which again has a flavor of John Milton, captures the speaker's amazement at this giant mountain peak that has suddenly appeared.

As the peak gradually becomes more revealed, it seems rise up from behind the ridge, almost as if it were moving. Using a simile, the speaker says that it, "As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head." To the speaker, the way the peak appears reminds him of a living creature, as if the peak were the "head" of some giant beast. The phrase "voluntary power instinct" suggests that the peak has sometime like a mind or life force, that it has the power to move and make choices. The peak seems very much alive. This perception marks the beginning of a turning point for the speaker. This living mountain peak introduces a new sense scale, dwarfing the boat and its delicate ripples.

In line 22, the meter grows a little distorted:

> The hori- | zon's bound, | a huge | peak, black | and huge,

The first foot is an anapest (da-da-DUM), though it is also possible to read it as an iamb (reading "hori-" as one syllable, e.g., "the h'ri-"; or by slurring the first two syllables, e.g., "th'ori-"). Either way, this opening foot has a slightly distorted sound to it. Similarly, the fourth foot is a spondee (DUM-DUM) which can also be read as an iamb ("peak, black"). These subtle and ambiguous deviations from the meter convey how the appearance of the peak disrupts the speaker's sense of his environment. Just as the stresses in these line seem to warp and twist, so too does landscape in front of the speaker.

LINES 24-29

I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me.

This sentence is where the mountain really seems to come alive. By line 29, the mountain seems "like a living thing, [that] / Strode after me." The mountain seems to chase the speaker. What causes this chase, however, is the speaker himself. As he "struck and struck again"—that is, as he keeps rowing—the mountain continues to be revealed. Yet while, in this sense, the speaker himself is intimately bound with the mountain, in another sense the speaker realizes the mountain is radically *different* from him.

The speaker describes the mountain as a "grim shape" that "Towered up between me and the stars." The mountain doesn't seem at all friendly or familiar. It looms above the speaker and blocks out the stars. Not only this, but the mountain seems to have "purpose of its own," to have its own thoughts and intentions. It is this phrase where the speaker perceives the mountain as truly alien. The mountain has a life of its own, a life much vaster than the speaker's, a life capable of blocking the

stars. To seal the deal, the speaker even sees the mountain has having "measured motion like a living thing"—that is, the mountain seems to be moving on its own.

In the speaker's mind, then, he isn't causing to mountain to appear as he adjusts his angle with it; instead, it seems the mountain is pursuing him as he rows away. As such, this moment can be seen as an instance of pathetic fallacy, that attribution of human traits to nonhuman things. People usually think of mountains as inert and inanimate. Here, though, the mountain has purpose and motion.

That said, this isn't a clear-cut case of the pathetic fallacy because the speaker isn't necessarily attributing *human* traits to the mountain. Rather, the mountain almost seems to be some kind of beast. At any rate, the idea of the pathetic fallacy is useful for getting a handle on what the speaker's doing here, which is attributing a greater sense of life to the mountain than is usually done.

On a more surface level, this moment can be interpreted as the young speaker letting his imagination get the better of him. At a deeper level, though, his imagination seems to be getting at some kernel of truth. Even if the mountain isn't literally pursuing him, it will figuratively pursue him in his thoughts throughout the rest of this passage. The speaker has grasped that the mountain *is* alive in some way that he didn't previously recognize. The mountain has an independent existence separate from speaker, an existence that exists on a scale that is much more vast and "grim" than the speaker can comprehend. At this moment, the speaker ceases to feel like a seamless part of nature, instead realizing that nature is in some way radically alien to him.

LINES 29-34

With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my bark,—
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood;

At this point, the speaker gets freaked out, his oars "trembling" as he shakes with fright. The speaker turns around and rows back to shore. Here, "stole" means to move quickly and quietly, and "bark" means ship. The speaker leaves his boat at the willow and walks home.

Although the speaker doesn't explicitly say what he felt in that moment, his reaction is decisive. He clearly turns away from his experience with the mountain. Rather than embracing or enjoying it, he is unnerved.

The speaker's reaction here—to run away from a mountain—is distinctly childlike. However, it hints at more than just an active and impressionable imagination. The speaker's reaction suggests that the mountain has shaken what he thought he knew about the world. He thought his adventure was going to be "one track / Of sparkling light," but it turns out there are vaster and scarier elements of the world out there as well. Notice, too, that the lake is again described as full of "silent water." This time, however, the water isn't peaceful but rather ominous, eerie.

As such, the speaker walks home "in grave / And serious mood." Again, this description suggests that the speaker isn't just scared, but is mulling something over. This experience has introduced him to some new quality of the world, to a "grim shape" that has a "purpose of its own," which he hadn't anticipated.

Wordsworth employs a slight poetic inversion in the phrase, "And through the meadows homeward went," rather than saying the more standard, *And went homeward through the meadows*. This inversion definitely has a touch of Milton to it, who was inspired by Latin grammar to employ unusual word order in his poetry. It is also based a more general tradition throughout English poetry from the Middle Ages to the early Modern period of using such inversions to elevate the language and fit the meter. Here, it allows a clean iambic pentameter to flow through:

> And through | the mea- | dows home- | ward went, |
> in grave
> And ser- | ious mood; [...]

The meter here, in combination with the enjambment of line 33, propels the line forward, just as the young speaker feels propelled homeward. Additionally, the inverted word order adds a lofty note to the line to match speaker's "serious" mood.

LINES 34-39

but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion.

In these next two sections, the speaker mulls over his experience on the lake. For next few days, the mountain sticks with him, haunting his thoughts. The "spectacle" of the mountain hangs "a darkness" over the speaker's mind. The speaker says this darkness is "solitude / Or blank desertion." "[D]esertion" means abandonment, as in *deserting someone or something*. In other words, the speaker has the sense of being alone in his thoughts. In this solitude, the speaker begins to intuit things that had never entered his thoughts before.

The language here is at once elevated, vague, and abstract. It's also the kind of language that Wordsworth is known for, the kind of language that made him a famous poet. Wordsworth was one of the earliest English poets to try to describe deeply

interior experiences, using poetry as a means of expressing hard-won insights into the nature of his own mind. There's a necessary vagueness that comes with such a project, because the mind itself is often vague. Yet Wordsworth expresses that vagueness with philosophical precision and rhetorical elegance. He writes:

> [...] for many days, my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; [...]

Let's work backwards with this quote:

- "[M]odes" means types, so "modes of being" means "types of existence" or "ways to exist."
- Yet they are "unknown," meaning that the speaker didn't know about them until now, and even still perhaps doesn't really understand them. He's just gotten the vague idea that there are way of existing that he knows nothing about.
- Finally, a "dim and undetermined sense" is an intuition that is murky and not clearly defined. The speaker hasn't received a crystal clear vision. Instead, his mind is occupied with an idea or thought that he can't quite get a handle on, like an indistinct object seen in the dim light of twilight.

Putting all this together: after his experience with the mountain, the speaker begins to have vague hints of other forms of existence. These vague hints come as the speaker has a growing sense of solitude. He is wrapped up in his own thoughts.

LINES 39-44

> *No familiar shapes*
> *Remained, no pleasant images of trees,*
> *Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;*
> *But huge and mighty forms, that do not live*
> *Like living men, moved slowly through the mind*
> *By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.*

Now, the speaker begins to unpack what he means by "unknown modes of being." He does this carefully, over several lines. First, he clarifies that the images in his mind are like nothing he has ever seen before. In fact, there are no "familiar shapes" in his mind. He can't picture any of the things he knows, like "images of trees, / Of sea or sky, [...] green fields"—all the things the speaker sees in his everyday life as he walks through the world.

Instead, the speaker's thoughts are occupied by things he's never seen in the real world, "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men." What exactly these "huge and mighty forms" are is left purposefully vague, *precisely vague*, as in the last section. After all, the speaker is describing a childhood experience, thoughts and ideas he had before he possessed the vocabulary to come to terms with them. Still, readers can make some inferences about what these forms are.

For one thing, they are shapes that the speaker's imagination has abstracted from what he's seen. Because the forms are "huge and mighty," it seems they are inspired by the "black and huge" peak that so terrified the speaker. By going over the image of the mountain again and again, the speaker's imagination has kept the peak's general shape, its essence, and gotten rid of everything else. And because the speaker had a distinct sense that the mountain was *alive*, his imagination has kept that element as well. Just as a mountain does "not live / Like living men," neither do these "forms," these abstract essences the speaker's imagination has concocted.

There's a good chance Wordsworth doesn't want readers to stop there, however. *The Prelude* is about Wordsworth's spiritual development, not about fanciful shapes he concocted in his mind as a kid. In fact, Wordsworth's friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge made a distinction between *fancy* (as in *fanciful*) and *imagination*. According to Coleridge, fancy was a lesser ability, the act of associating things without much effort. Imagination, on the other hand, creates and unifies; it sees into the nature of the existence—and that's what poets should do, according to Coleridge. Coleridge loved *The Prelude* (in fact, Wordsworth's working title for the poem was "Poem to Coleridge"!) so it's safe to say Coleridge viewed moments like lines 39-44 as acts of *imagination*, rather than fancy.

Applying this distinction here, then, Wordsworth would only be using fancy if he merely had associations of shadowy shapes in his head after seeing the mountain. However, if he's using his *imagination*, then those shapes lead him to a greater unity of experience, understanding of himself, and insight into the world.

What, then, is the insight here? Well, earlier Wordsworth realized that nature had a life of its own independent of his. Here, he seems to be reckoning with that independent life on a more abstract level. Rather than seeing the physical forms of nature, it's as if his imagination can see nature's *spiritual forms*. Almost as if Wordsworth can see the soul of the mountain in his imagination.

Another way to think about this through the lens of pantheism, the belief that God is present in all things—or, more radically, that all things *are* God. Many scholars have interpreted Wordsworth—along with other Romantic poets—as holding such a belief. Interpreted this way, then, these "huge and mighty forms" are glimpses of God, as if Wordsworth has seen through the physical mountain to God him-/her-/itself.

As the tone of these final lines implies, such an impression is too much for a young boy to fully comprehend. It's disconcerting, even frightening. The older Wordsworth will make sense of these impressions and cherish them, finding them exceedingly

beautiful. But for now they are "a trouble to my dreams," haunting and almost nightmarish.

SYMBOLS

THE BOAT

The speaker's "little boat" symbolizes his innocent, magical, and naive attitude towards nature. This attitude, which is at once childlike *and* complex, unfolds throughout lines 1-31. The depiction of the boat as a symbol likewise evolves.

At the beginning of this passage, the boat is like a part of the natural landscape. The image of "A little boat tied to a willow tree / Within a rocky cove" is picturesque, the kind of thing that might be in a landscape painting or an illustration in a children's book. The pleasant unity of boat and landscape reflects the speaker's own idea of his relationship with nature. He thinks of himself as part of nature, or—perhaps more accurately—of *nature* as part of *himself*. As Wordsworth once said of his childhood:

> I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature.

That is, the young Wordsworth thought of nature as a part of his own mind ("my own immaterial nature"). The boat, then, represents Wordsworth seamless link with natural world.

As evidence of this seamlessness, the move moves through the water silently, leaving beautiful ripples, "Small circles glittering idly in the moon." So great is this beauty, that Wordsworth thinks of his boat as magical, "an elfin pinnace"—that is, an elf's boat. This moment captures the boy's ability to find magic in an ordinary object (the boat). As a symbol, then, the boat represents the young speaker's ability to see the magic—and later, something like divinity or spiritual essences—in the natural world.

After becoming "an elfin pinnace" the boat makes its final metaphorical transformation into "a swan." Like a swan, the boat moves effortlessly through the water. And, like a swan—like any animal—the boat seems to be part of the natural environment. Again, this symbolizes the speaker's feeling of oneness with the world around him.

After the speaker gets frightened by the mountain peak, however, this symbolism changes. The boat's oars, which previously "dipped [...] into the silent lake" are now "trembling." The boat's effortless gliding has turned into shaking. The speaker rows back to shore and abandons his boat, walking home. Here, the "trembling oars" and act of leaving the boat symbolize the speaker's abandonment of his old attitude. After his experience with the mountain peak, he can no longer think of nature as he once did.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "I found / A little boat tied to a willow tree / Within a rocky cove, its usual home. / Straight I unloosed her chain"
- **Lines 6-11:** "nor without the voice / Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on; / Leaving behind her still, on either side, / Small circles glittering idly in the moon, / Until they melted all into one track / Of sparkling light."
- **Lines 17-20:** "She was an elfin pinnace; lustily / I dipped my oars into the silent lake, / And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat / Went heaving through the water like a swan;"
- **Line 32:** "There in her mooring-place I left my bark,—"

THE MOUNTAIN PEAK

The mountain peak symbolizes nature's living, breathing independence from the human mind—an independence that frightens the speaker. Part of the reason for this fright is that the mountain evokes the vastness of nature's independence. It suggests a sense of scale in which humans are dwarfed by "huge and mighty forms."

The speaker's very first description of the peak captures a sense of its forbidding quality: "a huge peak, black and huge." The peak is aloof, ominous, vaguely threatening. This impression is further solidified when the speaker calls it a "grim shape," a description that foreshadows his later depiction of "huge and mighty forms." Furthermore, the peak seems alive, like it's an animal. It has "purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing." This captures the sense that the mountain has its own rich existence independent of the speaker.

These impressions symbolize the speaker's new relationship with nature. Rather than feeling at one with the natural environment, the speaker feels separate from it—as separate as a puny human in a boat dwarfed by a millennia-old mountain peak.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 22-29:** "a huge peak, black and huge, / As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head. I struck and struck again, / And growing still in stature the grim shape / Towered up between me and the stars, and still, / For so it seemed, with purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing, / Strode after me."
- **Line 42:** "huge and mighty forms"

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker begins the poem with an important instance of personification by calling nature "her." Here, nature—which refers to earth, sky, the organic environment, etc.—becomes a female figure. It even takes on maternal qualities. (This is not to be confused with later uses of "her," which personify the speaker's "little boat" traditionally.)

This initial use of personification is based on the verse paragraph that comes before this passage in *The Prelude*. There, Wordsworth describes how nature keeps teaching him new lessons. By continuing to refer to nature in such a manner at the start of this passage, Wordsworth suggests that he's about to relate another lesson nature taught him.

Additionally, the phrase "led by her" hints at the kind of relationship the younger speaker has with nature at the outset of his little adventure. Nature, personified as a woman that teaches the speaker lessons, is a mother figure. The speaker has a very intimate and trusting relationship with "her," just as if they were mother and son, members of the same family

Taken out of personified terms: the speaker feels a close attachment to nature. He seems himself as part of the natural environment, continually following its slopes and trails ("led" by it) to discover new things about the world. As the narrative of this passage progresses, though, that relationship changes. Things stop feeling so cozy.

The uses of "her" and "she" that follow refer to the speaker's boat, since boats and ships are traditionally referred to by female pronouns in English. This use also adds a level of grandeur to the boat, since such personification is usually reserved for larger vessels. In the young speaker's imagination, the boat is an "elfin pinnace," an elf's boat. Although to other eyes it might just be a humble rowboat, to the speaker it is imbued with magic.

This continuation of female personification also suggests a connection between nature and the boat, which is supported by the depiction of the boat itself. For instance, the speaker compares the boat to a swan, hinting that it is just as much a part of nature as an animal. And the boat doesn't disturb the water so much as add to its beauty, creating "one track / Of sparkling light." These details suggest that the boat helps strengthen the speaker's connection to nature in the first half of the poem.

The speaker also personifies "mountain echoes" by describing them as a "voice." Mountain echoes could be any noise that filters down from the mountains: wind, birdsong, rustling trees, tumbling rocks, flowing water, etc. By calling them a "voice," though, the speaker again conveys the feeling of intimacy he has with nature, as if the noises of the mountain are talking to him. Some readers might even interpret this moment as verging into the pathetic fallacy (attributing human traits to nonhuman things), which is covered as its own entry of this guide.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "led by her"
- **Line 4:** "Straight I unloosed her chain"
- **Lines 6-7:** "the voice / Of mountain-echoes"
- **Lines 8-8:** "Leaving behind / still"
- **Line 8:** "her"
- **Line 17:** "She," " was an elfin pinnace"
- **Line 32:** "There in her mooring-place I left my bark"

PATHETIC FALLACY

In this passage, the speaker seems to use something like pathetic fallacy to depict a "huge" mountain peak. The word *pathetic* isn't used in the usual sense of "humiliatingly pitiful," but in its older, root meaning, from the Greek work *pathetic*, an appeal to a reader's or listener's emotions—something that elicits em*pathy* or sym*pathy*. A *fallacy* is a false belief. In other words, the so-called pathetic fallacy is a false attempt to see human qualities in non-human things. The qualities "seen" typically reflect things the observer feels.

There are a couple of issues with talking about this device in conjunction with the mountain, but first let's talk about why it kind of works before we talk about why it kind of doesn't.

The speaker describes the mountain as having "voluntary power instinct," something like consciousness or life force. The mountain doesn't just seem alive, but alive *and* active, alive and *up to something*. It has "purpose of its own." After all, it seems to move: it has "measured motion like a living thing." "[M]easured motion" is movement that has a steady rhythm to it, like walking, in comparison to something erratic, like a leaf tossed by the wind. All these descriptions combine to suggest that the mountain has a surprisingly human quality to it. Of course, at least at first blush, this is contrary to reality: mountains are inert slabs of rock, and most people wouldn't attribute anything like human consciousness to them. The mountain's domineering movement seems to reflect the speaker's own fear. A clear case, then, of the pathetic fallacy.

Except that other elements of the speaker's description complicate this interpretation. The speaker says that the mountain "Upreared its head," which makes it sound more like some kind of animal—like a horse or a dog—than a human. And at the end of the poem, the mountain inspires the speaker to see "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men."

These descriptions suggest that the speaker isn't necessarily comparing the mountain to a human, or at least not completely. Just as the forms are not alive in the same way humans are, perhaps the mountain too is also alive in its own, radically different way. Perhaps the speaker suddenly perceives the

mountain as having *some kind of inner life*, some sort of mountain consciousness. Or perhaps he glimpses some sort of spirit or divinity lying behind the "form" of the mountain.

Scholars have often interpreted Wordsworth as a pantheist—someone who believes that God and nature are identical. In this light, then, it makes sense that the young Wordsworth perceives the mountain as more than just an inert pile of rocks. To him, the mountain is a part of God, a slice of divinity, filled with some sort of spiritual essence. In this case, he's definitely not applying human characteristic to the mountain. But he's also not simply thinking of it as a plain old mountain anymore. Rather, he has encountered its radical independence from him, its living *mountain-ness* and its place within the divine structure of God.

In a way, thinking of the depiction of the mountain as the pathetic fallacy can help readers reach the radical conclusions outlined above. The mountain does have some human-like qualities, perhaps something like consciousness—except here, it's mountain-consciousness. This perception in turn can lead to realization of a sort of consciousness that pervades all things—God, divinity, spirit, whatever it should be called.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head"
- **Lines 27-29:** "with purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing, / Strode after me"
- **Lines 42-43:** "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men"

HYPOTAXIS

Hypotaxis is a type of syntax that involves long strings of dependent clauses—phrases that are grammatically interconnected. Wordsworth's use of hypotaxis is heavily inspired by John Milton's language in *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem about the Fall of Man in the Bible. Like Milton, Wordsworth combines hypotaxis with blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter). This produces a coiling, rhythmic language that captures both the intricacies of the speaker's thought and the gradual unfurling of the landscape.

To understand what Wordsworth is doing here, context about his inspiration is helpful. In Milton's poem, hypotaxis allows the poet to craft massive sentences that seem like they are going to take in the whole world in one sweep. Milton, however, was writing about the creation of the world, the fall of the angels, and the beginning of humankind, while Wordsworth has chosen a much more intimate subject: his own life.

Wordsworth's language thus isn't meant to convey the size of the world but rather the size of a single person's mind and imagination. His language captures what it's like to exist as a finite individual in time, yet also to have intuitions of divinity and the nature of reality.

The final sentence of this passage captures such a combination of smallness and hugeness:

> [...] No familiar shapes
> Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
> Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
> By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

This sentence, which unspools over six lines, takes place within Wordsworth's own mind, and yet it is filled with negated images of the outside world: "no pleasant images of trees, / Of sea of sky, no colours of green fields." It's as if he's saying, *My mind could have been filled with vast landscapes, but it wasn't.* In fact, the language leading up to this point *has* been filled with vast landscapes. For instance, Wordsworth uses hypotaxis to capture the gradual appearance of the mountain peak:

> When, from behind that craggy steep till then
> The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
> As if with voluntary power instinct,
> Upreared its head.

This evolving sentence conveys what it's like for the speaker, who is tiny in comparison to the mountain, to gradually glimpse this terrifying mountain peak.

Back to the final sentence, whose length carves out a vastness in the mind of the reader. Instead of nature, the speaker sees "huge and mighty forms" that "moved slowly through the mind." These forms create a new sense of abstract space, full of apparitions and glimpses of mysterious essences. The length of the sentence conveys such a largeness that doesn't exist in physical space, but in the speaker's and reader's imaginations. Thus, hypotaxis helps the poet summon the power of his imagination and convey that power to the reader.

Where Hypotaxis appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-44

DIACOPE

Diacope happens just twice in this passage, yet these two occurrences mark a crucial point in the speaker's experience.

First, the speaker describes the mountain peak that frightens him as "a huge peak, black and huge." The repetition of "huge" captures, well, just how huge the peak is. There might be something childlike about the young speaker's perception (*The peak was SO HUGE!*). But there's also something classical and elevated about this turn phrase that suggests the influence of, you guessed it, John Milton. As a kind of appositive or aside,

this phrase interrupts the flow of the sentence, increasing the sentence's length just as the peak increases the height of the horizon. It swells the sentence, so that the language strives to become as large as the peak it describes.

The second repetition comes just two lines later: "I **struck** and **struck** again." "[S]truck" refers to rowing, as the oars strike the water. It captures the zest with which speaker rows. Coming just two lines after the previous instance of diacope, there is a clear parallel between these two uses. The second use stands in a reactive relationship with the first. That is, the growing size of the peak seems to cause the speaker to react by rowing faster and faster. At first the speaker keeps rowing in the same direction, perhaps wanting to see more of the peak. Soon, though, the speaker gets too scared and heads back to shore.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 22:** "huge," "huge"
- **Line 24:** "struck," "struck"

POLYPTOTON

Polyptoton occurs at the end of this excerpt:

> But huge and mighty forms, that do not **live**
> Like **living** men

The two forms of "living" here capture the speaker's strange intuition that there are two kinds of life: that of humans, and that of these "mighty forms." As discussed throughout this guide, these lines detail a glimpse into some truth about nature not visible to the naked eye. What once was a physical mountain has transformed into something more abstract and spiritual in the speaker's mind. It is perhaps even a vision of the mountain's spirit or essence, even a vision of God.

The two forms of "live" capture the core of this vision. On one hand, there are "living men," people who are alive. This probably could be extended to anything traditionally said to be "living," like plants and animals. Yet the "forms" that the speakers has glimpsed "live" differently. They don't have bodies of flesh and blood, but are abstract, spiritual. They live, perhaps, in the same way that a triangle or a soul lives, on a wholly abstract plane. Perhaps.

At any rate, the speaker clearly isn't in a rush—isn't yet able—to go into details. But this use of polyptoton captures his core perception: that there are beings or entities or parts of the world that are radically different from humans. They are not alive in the same way humans are.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 42-43:** "that do not live / Like living men"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment doesn't just mean there's no punctuation at the ends of lines; it also means that grammar and syntax (the arrangements of words in a clause) cause one line to flow into the next. There's not always a hard and fast distinction between end-stop and enjambment in particular lines, but it's important to note that overall *The Prelude* is a heavily enjambed work of poetry. Written in blank verse, it doesn't have rhymes to halt the language at the ends of lines. Long sentences, piled with interlinked phrases, continually spill over the line breaks.

The first two lines establish the kind of enjambment the poem is going to use:

> One summer evening (led by her) I **found**
> A little boat tied to a willow *tree*
> *Within* a rocky cove, its usual home.
> Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping **in**
> **Pushed** from the shore. It was an act of *stealth*
> *And* troubled pleasure, nor without the **voice**
> **Of** mountain-echoes did my boat move on;

The lines in bold are clearly enjambed, while the italicized words are more ambiguous, though they still capture the feel of enjambment, of language spilling over across lines.

As this quote shows, then, lines in *The Prelude* tend to be linked and interdependent, rather than standing alone. They make the reader move quickly from line to line, almost like reading prose. This is important because *The Prelude* is a very long poem (several hundred pages) and it needs to proceed at a steady clip if readers are to stay engaged. The fact that this passage—and the poem as a whole—tells a story contributes to the overall pace and interconnectedness of the language.

Wordsworth's use of enjambment also captures the rhythms of the speaker's thoughts which are, it's usually assumed, Wordsworth's own thoughts. The way the language loops through line breaks conveys a mind that is both fluid and long-winded in how it speaks to itself. Wordsworth doesn't convey thought in the halting parataxis of a later prose writer like Samuel Becket (Waiting for Godot). Rather, he values language that feels like a river or stream.

At the same time, Wordsworth's language isn't out of control. Though he enjambs a lot and writes very long sentences, the line breaks are still expertly controlled and always working in tandem with the meter.

> [...] It **was** | an **act** | of **stealth**
> And **trou-** | bled **plea-** | sure, **nor** | with**out** | the **voice**
> Of **moun-** | tain-**ech-** | oes **did** | my **boat** | move **on;**

Wordsworth is very disciplined in his use of line breaks, always maintaining the meter and lending emphasis to the words he

breaks on: "stealth," "voice," "move on." Each of these words adds a little more to the scenery and narrative as it unfolds.

As evidence of how carefully Wordsworth chooses his end words, look what happens if just those end words are listed in order:

- "found"—"tree"—"home"—"in"—"stealth"—"voice"—"move on"—"side"—"moon"—"track"—"rows"—"point"—"view"—"ridge"—"above"—"sky"—etc.

This list provides a kind of skeleton of the events and imagery in the passage, showing how deliberate Wordsworth's use of line breaks and enjambment is.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "found / A"
- **Lines 2-3:** "tree / Within"
- **Lines 4-5:** "in / Pushed"
- **Lines 5-6:** "stealth / And"
- **Lines 6-7:** "voice / Of"
- **Lines 10-11:** "track / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "rows, / Proud"
- **Lines 12-13:** "point / With"
- **Lines 13-14:** "view / Upon"
- **Lines 15-16:** "above / Was"
- **Lines 17-18:** "lustily / I"
- **Lines 19-20:** "boat / Went"
- **Lines 21-22:** "then / The"
- **Lines 25-26:** "shape / Towered"
- **Lines 26-27:** "still, / For"
- **Lines 27-28:** "own / And"
- **Lines 28-29:** "thing, / Strode"
- **Lines 30-31:** "way / Back"
- **Lines 33-34:** "grave / And"
- **Lines 34-35:** "seen / That"
- **Lines 35-36:** "brain / Worked"
- **Lines 36-37:** "sense / Of"
- **Lines 37-38:** "thoughts / There"
- **Lines 39-40:** "shapes / Remained"
- **Lines 42-43:** "live / Like"
- **Lines 43-44:** "mind / By"

CAESURA

As our highlights show, Wordsworth uses caesura pretty often this passage. It functions as an integral element of Wordsworth's heavily enjambed blank verse. Because the language often spills over line breaks, it instead stops in the middles of lines, creating caesurae. The caesurae do a great deal of work for poem's overall rhythm and texture.

Lets look at the poem's last sentence, which is the rhetorical height of this passage:

> [...] No familiar shapes
> Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
> Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
> By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

Notice how the line break "No familiar shapes / Remained" causes emphasis to land dramatically on "Remained." This creates a feeling of delay, suspense, and surprise. It gives the beginning of the line a propulsive rhythm that the following caesurae contribute to. Sometimes, they break the iambic pentameter into smaller chunks, as with, "no pleasant images of trees, / Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields; / But huge and mighty forms." These smaller chunks feel like short bursts of energy, as the speaker continues to emphasize how all these images have disappeared from his imagination.

Or, caesurae allow phrases to wrap around line breaks: "that do not live / Like living men, moved slowly through the mind / By day." Combined with the short bursts, these wrap-around phrases create a very dynamic quality to the language. It is full of energy and movement, alive and always evolving.

Throughout this passage, caesurae work similarly. They prevent the language from being presented in choppy, iambic-pentameter-sized chunks, where the only punctuation is end-stops. This would make each line seem like its own unit, whereas Wordsworth is after a much more intricate, fluid effect that caesurae help him achieve.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "evening (led," "her) I"
- **Line 3:** "cove, its"
- **Line 4:** "chain, and"
- **Line 5:** "shore. It"
- **Line 6:** "pleasure, nor"
- **Line 8:** "still, on"
- **Line 11:** "light. But," "now, like"
- **Line 12:** "skill, to"
- **Line 13:** "line, I"
- **Line 15:** "boundary; far"
- **Line 17:** "pinnace; lustily"
- **Line 19:** "And, as," "stroke, my"
- **Line 21:** "When, from"
- **Line 22:** "bound, a," "peak, black"
- **Line 24:** "head. I"
- **Line 26:** "stars, and"
- **Line 27:** "seemed, with"
- **Line 29:** "me. With"
- **Line 33:** "went, in"
- **Line 34:** "mood; but"
- **Line 35:** "spectacle, for," "days, my"
- **Line 37:** "being; o'er"
- **Line 38:** "darkness, call"

- **Line 39:** “desertion. No”
- **Line 40:** “Remained, no”
- **Line 41:** “sky, no”
- **Line 42:** “forms, that”
- **Line 43:** “men, moved”
- **Line 44:** “day, and”

SIMILE

For all of Wordsworth's abstract philosophizing, *The Prelude* is at its root a literal and imagery-filled poem. It is about concrete things Wordsworth did and saw during his life. In fact, it is only by first summoning such things that Wordsworth can then use simile to invest them with a dash of magic, convey how he felt about them, or extract a philosophical lesson. Each simile in this passage takes part in this relationship with the literal things Wordsworth descr

In fact, the first simile is so literal it's almost not a simile. The speaker says he is

> [...] like one who rows,
> Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
> With an unswerving line,

The speaker is "like" someone who's proud of how good he is at rowing in a straight line. Of course, the speaker also just kind of *is* that sort of person. This use of "like," then, emphasizes how the speaker is trying out being a certain kind of person, acting like someone who's really good at rowing to see if he fits the role. Overall, then, this early simile captures the childhood experience of trying to figure out who you are, of playing at certain types of people.

The next simile compares the movement of the speaker's boat to that of a swan: "my boat / Went heaving through the water like a swan." Here, the speaker's comparison helps integrate the boat *further* into its environment. That is, simile emphasizes how the boat is animal-like, how it seems to belong in the lake, rather than intruding on it. Perhaps there are even swans on this lake during the day. In which case, the speaker's simile once again emphasizes the literal facts about the scene, contributing to a realistic description.

Next, the speaker employs two very striking, related similes. First, he describes a "huge peak" that "as if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head." In other words, the mountain seems lift its head (i.e. its peak) as if it has conscious will, like an animal. A few lines later, the speaker says that the peak has "purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing." Again, these simile suggests that the mountain, like a creature, has controlled movement and conscious intentions. This might not seem very literal—a living moving mountain!?—but its actually conveying the speaker's impressions very precisely. In that moment, the mountain *is* alive to the speaker, and he gets frightened.

Moreover, as the end of the passage seems to hint, there is a core of truth to the suggestion that the mountain is alive—it's just not alive in the same sense that people are. The mountain leads the speaker to imagine shadowy "forms." More precisely, the speaker sees "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men." This simile, which is also a negation, suggests a form of life that is not at all like being alive as an organic being. Perhaps, instead, these "forms" are alive in the same way that a soul can be said to be alive, or God can, or even an idea like beauty. All this to say, the speaker's perception that the mountain is alive leads him to imagine these forms, which "live" in a totally unprecedented sense of the word. Reapplying this back to the mountain, then, the mountain can also be said to "not live / Like living men."

Read this way, all the similes in this passage capture the speaker's specific observations of the world around him. Even the more abstract similes in the second half of the poem ultimately refer back to a concrete perception about the world.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** “like one who rows, / Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point / With an unswerving line,”
- **Lines 19-20:** “my boat / Went heaving through the water like a swan”
- **Lines 22-24:** “a huge peak, black and huge, / As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head.”
- **Lines 27-28:** “with purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing”
- **Lines 42-43:** “huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men,”

ASSONANCE

Wordsworth's use of assonance is pretty restrained, especially compared to his use of consonance. Many of its appearances are fairly muted, just a faint hum in the background of the language.

Some instances of assonance do stand out, however, such as those in lines 2 and 3. Here, Wordsworth delicately describes the mooring place of the boat the speaker is about to steal:

> A little boat tied to a willow tree
> Within a rocky cove, its usual home.

These two lines employ a subtle economy of short /i/ and long /o/ sounds. The two sounds play off each other in the same way the willow tree plays off the water, the short /i/ sounds summoning the intricate texture of the tree while the long /o/ sounds capture the flowing water and space of the cove.

A similarly delicate moment occurs a few lines later:

> Leaving behind her still, on either side,
> Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
> Until they melted all into one track
> Of sparkling light.

The short /e/ and long and short /i/ sounds combine to suggest light playing off the gentle ripples of the boat. Because Wordsworth almost seems to studiously vary his vowels to *avoid* assonance, these moments of repetition stand out even though they are sometimes a little far apart, like "idly" and "light." Notice too how in the first line, the order of /e/ then /i/ in "Leaving behind" is mirrored by "either side," so that both ends of the line have the same pattern, just as the boat leaves "small circle glittering" on either side of it.

There are also much quieter moments. The long /e/ and short /a/ in line 34, "And serious mood; but after I had seen," for instance. Or lines 26-27:

> Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
> For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
> And measured motion like a living thing,

Here the long /e/ and short /i/ lend a very subtle harmony in the background of this language. All these moments, however noticeable, help unify the long swaths of English curling their way through blank verse.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "One," "summer," "by," "I"
- **Line 2:** "little," "willow"
- **Line 3:** "Within," "cove," "home"
- **Line 4:** "Straight," "chain"
- **Line 5:** "an," "act"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "Leaving," "behind," "either," "side"
- **Line 9:** "glittering," "in"
- **Line 10:** "Until"
- **Line 11:** "light," "like"
- **Line 12:** "his," "skill"
- **Line 13:** "I," "my"
- **Line 14:** "summit," "ridge"
- **Line 15:** "above"
- **Line 16:** "nothing," "but"
- **Line 18:** "I," "dipped," "my," "into," "silent"
- **Line 19:** "I," "stroke," "boat"
- **Line 20:** "water," "swan"
- **Line 21:** "When," "then"
- **Line 22:** "huge," "huge"
- **Line 23:** "if," "instinct"
- **Line 24:** "Upreared," "struck," "struck"
- **Line 25:** "still," "grim"
- **Line 26:** "between," "me," "still"
- **Line 27:** "it," "seemed," "with," "its"
- **Line 28:** "living," "thing"
- **Line 30:** "silent," "my"
- **Line 31:** "covert," "of"
- **Line 32:** "left"
- **Line 33:** "meadows," "went"
- **Line 34:** "serious," "after," "had," "seen"
- **Line 35:** "That," "days," "brain"
- **Line 37:** "unknown," "modes," "thoughts"
- **Line 38:** "darkness," "call," "solitude"
- **Line 39:** "blank," "shapes"
- **Line 40:** "Remained," "trees"
- **Line 41:** "sea," "green," "fields"
- **Line 42:** "live"
- **Line 43:** "living," "moved," "through," "mind"
- **Line 44:** "By"

CONSONANCE

The speaker's use of consonance is more pronounced than his use of assonance. Repeating consonants help anchor the poem's long sentences while also creating a texture that propels the poem forward. That said, Wordsworth's use of consonance is not overly loud—a skilled rhetorician, he values subtlety in the sound of his language rather than bombast.

One example of Wordsworth's use of consonance is in lines 8-11:

> Leaving behind her still, on either side,
> Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
> Until they melted all into one track
> Of sparkling light.

The /l/ sound is called a liquid consonant, a named which perfectly matches its effect in this passage. The /l/ trickles or flow through these lines, so that the language seems to "melt[]" just like the ripples of the boat. This use of a liquid consonant also captures how the speaker keeps the language moving. Because the /l/ sound flows so easily out of the mouth, these lines in turn have a steady flow to them. They keep the narrative moving.

Some moments play up the harder, clunkier consonant sounds, as with the /k/ sound in "a huge peak, black and huge." For the most part, though, even the more powerful sounds, like /m/, ultimately contribute to the fluidity of the language. For instance, here's lines 35-37:

> for many days, my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts

These /m/ sounds push the language forward while also linking

the lines' key words.

There are also some instances of alliteration, often involving the /m/ sound as well. For instance, there's "measured motion" in line 28. It lines 42-43 it combines with consonance: "mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men, moved slowly through the mind." Overall, though, Wordsworth is also pretty economical with his use alliteration. Many times he folds it into his use of consonance, as in this example. Again, he is after subtlety—he wants the sound of his language to support the overall sweep and rhythm of his rhetoric.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "One," "evening," "found"
- **Line 2:** "little," "tied," "to," "willow," "tree"
- **Line 3:** "rocky," "cove"
- **Line 4:** "Straight," "unloosed," "chain," "and," "stepping," "in"
- **Line 5:** "Pushed," "shore," "act," "stealth"
- **Line 6:** "troubled," "pleasure," "nor," "without," "the," "voice"
- **Line 7:** "Of," "my," "move"
- **Line 8:** "Leaving," "still," "side"
- **Line 9:** "Small," "circles," "glittering," "idly," "moon"
- **Line 10:** "Until," "melted," "all," "into," "one," "track"
- **Line 11:** "sparkling," "light," "now," "one," "rows"
- **Line 12:** "Proud," "his," "skill," "chosen," "point"
- **Line 13:** "an," "unswerving," "line"
- **Line 14:** "craggy," "ridge"
- **Line 15:** "horizon's," "boundary," "far," "above"
- **Line 16:** "stars," "sky"
- **Line 17:** "an," "elfin," "pinnace," "lustily"
- **Line 18:** "silent," "lake"
- **Line 19:** "And," "rose," "stroke"
- **Line 20:** "Went," "water"
- **Line 21:** "When," "from," "behind," "craggy," "steep," "till"
- **Line 22:** "horizon's," "bound," "peak," "black"
- **Line 23:** "voluntary," "power," "instinct"
- **Line 24:** "struck," "struck"
- **Line 25:** "growing," "still," "stature," "grim," "shape"
- **Line 26:** "Towered," "up," "between," "stars," "still"
- **Line 27:** "so," "seemed," "purpose," "its"
- **Line 28:** "measured," "motion," "like," "living," "thing"
- **Line 29:** "Strode," "after," "me," "trembling," "oars," "turned"
- **Line 30:** "through," "the," "silent," "water," "stole," "way"
- **Line 31:** "Back," "covert," "tree"
- **Line 32:** "There," "her," "mooring," "place," "left," "my," "bark"
- **Line 33:** "through," "meadows," "homeward," "went," "in," "grave"
- **Line 34:** "serious," "seen"
- **Line 35:** "spectacle," "many," "my," "brain"
- **Line 36:** "Worked," "dim," "undetermined," "sense"
- **Line 37:** "unknown," "modes," "my," "thoughts"
- **Line 38:** "There," "darkness," "call," "it," "solitude"
- **Line 39:** "blank," "desertion," "No," "familiar"
- **Line 40:** "Remained," "pleasant"
- **Line 41:** "sea," "or," "sky," "colours," "green," "fields"
- **Line 42:** "mighty," "forms," "live"
- **Line 43:** "Like," "living," "men," "moved," "slowly," "mind"
- **Line 44:** "were," "trouble," "to," "my," "dreams"

IMAGERY

The imagery in this passage operates in a distinctly Wordsworthian way. It's important to take note of this, because Wordsworth helped rethink the role of imagery in English poetry. Wordsworth, along with other Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Clare, committed themselves to direct observations of the natural world in a way that few poets had before. Throughout this passage, Wordsworth provides the surrounding scene with vivid clarity, making it come to life and emphasizing its important role in the story. Every step of the way, the reader senses how strong an impression these images made on the speaker as a young boy.

Before delving into specific images, notice their general progression and unfolding, how each image is revealed at a specific point in the story—how, in effect, the images *are* the story.

The poem begins with "a willow tree / Within a rocky cove," moves on to the boat's "Small circles glittering idly," looks up at "the stars and the grey sky," describes the "craggy ridge" and then the appearance of "a huge peak," mentions the speaker's way home through "the meadows," and ends with the *absence* of "pleasant images" and the half-image of "huge and mighty forms.

Through this series of images, it's possible to track a kind of topology of narrative, where the speaker's attention goes up and down from sky to water, and the land fluctuates from water to mountain to flat meadow to the abstract space of the imagination. This fluctuation mirrors the fluctuation of the speaker's internal states. And that's Wordsworth's whole reason for writing like this in the first place.

Now onto some specific images. One of the most striking comes early on, as Wordsworth describes his boat:

> Leaving behind her still, on either side,
> Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
> Until they melted all into one track
> Of sparkling light.

This watery, crystalline imagery is beautiful just to contemplate on its own. It also conveys the young speaker's fascination with this scene, how he is struck by wonder while also feeling very

intimately connected to it. His boat isn't making the water choppy or ugly, instead it actually adds to the beauty of the scene.

When the speaker looks up, he sees:

> the summit of a craggy ridge,
> The horizon's utmost boundary; far above
> Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.

This imagery contrasts with the boat's ripples. The "craggy ridge" and "grey sky" create an impression of immensity, a hard, steely feeling of vastness. It leads, of course, to the "huge peak, black and huge," an image of terror to the speaker.

These two types of images capture two opposing attitudes in the speaker. And attitude of connection to the beauty of nature, and an attitude of separation from its vastness and massive shapes. More generally, these images show how Wordsworth's detailed descriptions of the natural landscape in turn create a narrative about his own internal development.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 4-5
- Lines 6-11
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-22
- Line 24
- Lines 24-26
- Line 29
- Lines 29-33
- Lines 37-38
- Lines 40-42

VOCABULARY

Her (Line 1) - Nature, whom the speaker personified in the preceding verse paragraphs; he continues to do so here.

Cove (Line 3) - A small bay or inlet.

Straight (Line 4) - Immediately.

Unloosed (Line 4) - Untied.

Stealth (Line 5) - Sneaky movement.

Troubled (Line 6) - Uneasy, bothered, worried.

Idly (Line 9) - In stillness, lazily, without purpose.

Unswerving (Line 13) - Straight, not deviating from its path.

Craggy Ridge (Line 14) - The long top edge of a mountain, hilltop, or mountain range.

Utmost (Line 15) - Topmost, highest.

Elfin (Line 17) - The adjectival form of *elf*; i.e., this is an elf's boat.

Pinnace (Line 17) - A small boat. Here the word has a poetic quality to it. An "elfin pinnace" is thus an elf's boat.

Lustily (Line 17) - Heartily, robustly, pleasurably. The word doesn't mean "lustful," but comes from its root word meaning physical pleasure of any sort.

Stroke (Line 19) - The motion of rowing rowing with the boat's oars.

Heaving (Line 20) - Moving, gliding.

Steep (Line 21) - Mountain slope.

Bound (Line 22) - Boundary. In other words, the ridge was the highest edge of the horizon.

Peak (Line 22) - A mountain peak.

Voluntary power instinct (Line 23) - The phrase suggests conscious will, awareness, or at least some sort of lifelike quality in the mountain.

Grim shape (Line 25) - The mountain peak, which has a serious, imposing, even scary shape to the speaker.

Measured motion (Line 28) - Steady movement, like walking.

Strode (Line 29) - Past tense of *stride*. The mountain seems to chase the speaker.

Stole (Line 30) - Not the usual meaning of "stole," but a now outdated one meaning to move quietly and quickly.

Covert (Line 31) - Pronounced KUH-vert. A secretive thicket where animals can hide.

Mooring-place (Line 32) - Where the boat is *moored*, i.e., tied to shore.

Bark (Line 32) - Boat. Interestingly, its root word (Latin *barca*, a ship's boat, which also gives us the word *barge*) is different from the root word for *bark* meaning *tree bark* (Old Norse *börkr*) as well as for a *dog's bark* (Old English *beorcan*).

Grave (Line 33) - Somber, serious.

Spectacle (Line 35) - Here referring to the speaker's experience with the mountain peak.

Dim (Line 36) - Poorly lit, dark. It describes how the speaker isn't quite able to grasp the things on his mind.

Undetermined (Line 36) - Not defined, not concrete or comprehensible yet. In other words, the speaker hasn't resolved the meanings of what he's thinking.

Unknown Modes of Being (Line 37) - A "mode" is a type of something. "Unknown modes of being" are *ways of existing* that the speaker doesn't understand, doesn't know anything about.

Solitude (Line 38) - A state of being alone.

Blank desertion (Line 39) - To *desert* someone or something is to abandon it. "[B]lank desertion" is thus a feeling of abandonment coupled with a "blank" or empty feeling.

Forms (Line 42) - Shapes, shadows.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This is a narrative poem (really, a section of a much longer poem) of 44 lines, but it has no traditional form. Instead, it's one long block of text. The lack of stanza breaks here remind the reader that this is a single, contained incident within a much larger work. Because there is no steady form here to guide readers, it's worth paying close attention to the way Wordsworth plays with language itself.

The Prelude is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter (five feet in a da-DUM rhythm). We talk about the specifics of what this means in the Meter section of this guide. Here, let's take a beat to understand the broader formal legacy Wordsworth is tapping into.

Wordsworth modeled his use of this form after John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, written in the 1650s-60s, about the Fall of Adam and Eve. Milton's use of blank verse for a long narrative poem was controversial at the time for its lack of rhyme, but it proved incredibly influential for later generations of poets. Milton's was in turn inspired by ancient poets like Homer and Virgil, who also didn't rhyme in their epics *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*.

Wordsworth's goal, however, was not to tell an ancient story of gods and heroes, but to describe the development of *his own imagination* through experiences in nature. As a result, he turns the language of these older poets inward, capturing the rhythms of his own thought and the expansiveness of his imagination. In doing so, he elevates such subjects to the level of an epic tale.

The sentences in this poem reflect that goal as well. To tell *his* story, Milton borrowed many devices from Homer and Virgil, especially Virgil's long, complex Latin sentences. In English, this creates a device called hypotaxis, in which sentences are composed of many interlinked phrases. Wordsworth was heavily inspired by this kind of writing, and incorporates it into *The Prelude*. His lengthy, enjambed sentences are on display in lines 34-38:

> [...] but after I had seen
> That spectacle, for many days, my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
> There hung a darkness [...]

Here, each line pushes forward into the next, suggesting taut interconnection. But whereas Milton used language like this to suggest the vastness of the cosmos as powerful angels fought each other, Wordsworth uses it to summon the vastness of *his own imagination*. Again, tapping into this style is a way for Wordsworth to elevate his personal experiences. Wordsworth is taking Milton's sense of the epic and *applying it to his own life*.

METER

The Prelude is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter (meaning each line has five iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm). This meter has a strong effect on the overall sense of the poem's form, so it's discussed in that section of the guide as well. Here, let's zero in on some specific examples of Wordsworth's meter. He maintains expert control of stress throughout the poem, using it to work in tandem with the poem's content and syntax (its arrangement of words).

The first line provides a good example of clean iambic pentameter:

> One sum- | mer eve- | ning (led | by her) | I found

This starts the passage off with a straightforward example of the poem's meter. Such moments reassure the reader that Wordsworth remains in control of the poem throughout its long swaths of text—*The Prelude* is several hundred pages long, so if readers felt like the speaker was just blabbering away with no sense artistic engagement, they'd probably just stop reading!

This initial line also establishes an interesting quality to Wordsworth's iambic pentameter: it's often paired with enjambments. In fact, even when the lines aren't strictly enjambed, they have the feeling of flowing into each other, as in lines 6-8:

> [...] nor | without | the voice
> Of moun- | tain-ech- | oes did | my boat | move on;
> Leaving | behind | her still,

Line 7, which ends on a semi-colon, isn't technically enjambed, but the way that line 8 picks up with an immediate stressed syllable suggests there's little pause between the two lines. Instead, this initial stress seems to cling to the final stress of line 7.

Notice also how the steady iambs of line 6 flow into line 7. One interesting quality of Wordsworth's writing in *The Prelude* is how the language can *almost* start to feel like rhythmic prose at certain points.

In moments where the line breaks seems to dissolve, and meter and syntax conspire to create a unified flow of language, it can be easy to lose track of the fact that this is a poem made of individual lines, each with five beats. But that's part of what Wordsworth's after. He doesn't want his language to feel artificial, but like an authentic outpouring of his most beautiful thoughts. As such, it's actually part of his achievement that he's

able to write in an iambic pentameter so controlled it almost disappears, that it folds into the natural movements of the language.

This control doesn't mean that there are no variations in the meter, however. Sometimes, Wordsworth uses a trochee (DUM-da) instead of an iamb for the first syllable of a line, as in line 21:

When, from | behind | that crag- | gy steep | till then

This is a classic way to vary the meter. It creates an emphatic moment at the beginning of the line, conveying the speaker's surprise as the "huge peak" slowly reveals itself. At the same time, though, it allows the speaker to seamlessly transition back into iambic pentameter. This moment, then, allows for clear emphasis that fits into a steady rhythm overall. Moreover, it prevents the meter from becoming monotonous, from seeming artificial. Instead, such variations capture the feeling of a living, breathing language composed by a vibrant mind.

RHYME SCHEME

The Prelude is written in blank verse, meaning it doesn't rhyme. Having a clear, steady rhyme scheme would feel too structured and predictable for the poem, the form of which instead follows its speaker's wandering thoughts and experiences during this boat journey. In choosing a form that doesn't snap shut with the certainty of rhyme, Wordsworth allows his poem to instead sprawl out in enjambed, never-ending trains of thought. His poetry is based on authenticity, perception, and the rhythms of the mind, and the lack of rhyme reflects that.

SPEAKER

The speaker of *The Prelude* is usually interpreted as Wordsworth himself, a reading licensed by the poem's full title: *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem*. This title was given to the poem by Wordsworth's widow, Mary; nonetheless it clearly reflects Wordsworth's intentions. The poem tracks Wordsworth's spiritual development from birth to adulthood. He uses specific events from his life, as in the passage at hand. As such, the poem can be thought of as a poem-memoir hybrid.

At the same time, the poem is meant to have universal applicability. Although the reader should understand the imagery here as depicting concrete things that Wordsworth really encountered—as the feelings to be ones he really felt—the reader is *also* meant to see them as representing the kinds of experiences *anyone* can have. Wordsworth's penchant for extracting spiritual lessons from these episodes, as happens at the end of this passage, stems from his belief that these lessons are universal. He believes that anyone open to the natural world and the drift of their own thoughts can have the mind of a poet, can see the world as he sees it.

As such, the specificity of *The Prelude* is meant to open up to a universal understanding. The poet and speaker Wordsworth is meant to become the voice of a divine force that flows between humans and all natural things, a voice that has spoken to him through concrete experiences and profound emotions, both of which he now passes on to the reader.

SETTING

The poem takes place on a lake on a "summer evening." There are plenty of details to help readers get the lay of the land: the small boat is tied to a "willow tree" in a "rocky cove," or small bay. The moon is out, and the night is quiet. Eventually a huge mountain comes into view, startling the speaker. The final moments of the poem then move away from the lake and to the speaker's home—or, more specifically, into his mind, as he reflects on his experience on the water.

The context of the poem fleshes out the setting further. This passage comes from Book 1 of *The Prelude*, which takes place in the Lake District in North West England, where Wordsworth grew up. The landscape of the Lakes District played an important role in Wordsworth's early childhood. Other passages from this book describe how Wordsworth roved the forests and mountains, learning from nature. The personification of nature here ("led by her"), in which nature becomes a maternal figure, captures this relationship.

Additionally, Wordsworth's intimate connection to the landscape he grew up in means that "her," nature, can be read as specifically conjuring the Lakes District. In other words, his concept of nature had been informed since birth by the specific ecology he grew up in. For Wordsworth, nature in this sense *is* the Lakes District.

Another important thing to note about Wordsworth's intimacy with nature is that often the *setting* basically becomes the *story*. Each observation of nature corresponds to some inner state in the speaker—in fact, this is one of the central beliefs of Romanticism. So, when Wordsworth describes the following...

> Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
> Until they melted all into one track
> Of sparkling light. [...]

...he's simultaneously describing his own awe at the beauty of the scene. He's even suggests that he too has "melted" into the scenery, that he feels at one with nature.

Wordsworth later uses the image of the "huge peak" to illustrate this relationship in a more explicit manner. First, Wordsworth describes an event in the natural world: the mountain's "the grim shape / Towered up between me and the stars," creating a patch of pure darkness in the sky. Later on,

that event creates a corresponding experience in his own mind, "a darkness" in which "huge and mighty forms [...] moved slowly." By using a delay between image and inner experience, and by emphasizing its profound effect on him, Wordsworth also captures the powerful intertwining of individual and setting that was so central to his poetry.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wordsworth is generally considered as being among the first generation of English Romantic poets. Artists and writers associated with Romanticism valued individuality, introspection, and passionate emotion. While focusing on deeply interior experiences, however, they also depicted how those experience were connected to the natural environment. As a result, Romanticism presented two major innovations in European writing: detailed writing about people's inner states and lush descriptions of nature.

Romanticism developed concurrently with the Enlightenment, which emphasized reason and skepticism. The Romantics rejected such aspects of the Enlightenment, while at the same time joining in the demand for liberty and a greater sense of individual capability. Romantics also tended to look back in history for older models, particularly the Renaissance poets William Shakespeare and John Milton.

As noted throughout this guide, Wordsworth viewed *The Prelude* is an adaptation of the techniques Milton developed in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. But whereas *Paradise Lost* tells the story of the Fall of Satan and Adam and Eve, Wordsworth chose his own life as a subject. He turns the kind of language Milton used inward, capturing his thoughts and impressions during significant moments throughout his life—moments he calls "spots of time" later in *The Prelude*.

Started in the 1790s, and continually revised until Wordsworth's death in 1850, *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* was called "Poem (title not yet fixed upon) to Coleridge" in its early phases. As this working title suggests, Wordsworth was heavily inspired by his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another major Romantic poet and intellectual. They planned to write a long philosophical poem called *The Recluse* that *The Prelude* would have been the prologue for; hence its ultimate title.

Wordsworth never got more than a few books (i.e., chapters) into this second poem, however. Instead, he continued to tinker with *The Prelude*, which captures the headiness, adventure, and beauty of the most fervent and productive period of his career. This guide uses the text of Wordsworth's final version of the poem, from 1850.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because Wordsworth lived into his 80s, his life straddles several historical periods. *The Prelude* covers the early periods of Wordsworth's life, and are distinctly linked to the times he grew up in. Wordsworth spent his childhood in the Lake District, where he received a good education and was enamored with the natural landscape. As a young man, he attended Cambridge University and travelled extensively through Europe. In fact, he was in France during the French Revolution.

This marks the most important intellectual and historical commitment of Wordsworth's early career—to the Republican values of the Revolution (that is, to the establishment of a Republic based on equality among men). Wordsworth's emphasis on individuality can be seen as intertwined with his early sympathy for these values. His experiences in France are described in *The Prelude*.

Eventually, though, the Rein of Terror caused Wordsworth to become disillusioned with the Revolution. As his career progressed, his friendship with Coleridge led him to more spiritual and philosophical interests. Yet the two friends became estranged in the 1810s and Wordsworth's work began to move in a more conservative direction. He was eventually appointed Poet Laureate and given a cushy job as a postmaster.

Wordsworth's conservative turn coincides with the rise of Victorian Era morality. While the Victorians presided over an increased interest in societal reforms, scientific thinking, and the rise of the business class, they also promoted a strict moral code that involved strict gender roles, harsh discipline, and a surge of Evangelical Christianity. Wordsworth's later work, *The Recluse*, would become very popular during this time, as its themes more closely aligned with these values.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Prelude in Full — The entire 1850 text of The Prelude. The passage in this guide is from Book 1. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Prelude_(Wordsworth))
- The 1799 Version of Boat Stealing — This excerpt from the Poetry Foundation contains the same passage as it was originally written in 1799, before more than 50 years of editing. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45542/the-prelude-book-1-childhood-and-school-time)
- The Lakes District — Information about the Lakes District, where Wordsworth grew up and where this passage takes place. (https://www.lakedistrict.gov.uk/learning)
- Intimations of Immortality — In this poem, "Ode:

Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Wordsworth reflects on spiritual intuitions he had as a child, and how growing up has affected those intuitions. Note its resonances with the Boat Stealing passage. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood)

- A Biography of Wordsworth — A detailed biography of Wordsworth, along with additional poems, from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The World Is Too Much With Us

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