Ode: Intimations of Immortality from

POEM TEXT

The child is father of the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.
(Wordsworth, "My Heart Leaps Up")

1

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

2

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

3

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay;
Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday—
Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-boy!

4

Ye blessed creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fullness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.
Oh evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
This sweet May morning,
And the Children are culling
On every side,
In a thousand valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm—
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
—But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

5

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy
But he

Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

6

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her foster child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

7

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pygmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song;
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part;
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

8

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted forever by the eternal mind—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

9

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That Nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast—
Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised;
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;

Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

10

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts today
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now forever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

11

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a newborn Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

SUMMARY

Once upon a time, I saw all of nature, even the most ordinary parts of it, as if it were shining with heavenly light—as luminous, beautiful, and novel as a dream. But it's not like that for me anymore. Wherever I look now, in the nighttime or the daytime, I can't see the things I used to see.

Rainbows appear and disappear; roses are beautiful; the moon looks around with joy in a clear sky; waters reflecting the stars are deeply lovely; and every sunrise is a gorgeous new beginning. And yet I'm aware that, no matter where I wander, some shining light has left this world.

Today, while I listened to the spring birds happily singing, and watched the new lambs hopping around as if they were dancing to the beat of a drum, I was struck by a mournful thought. I soon expressed that thought, which made me feel better, and now I've regained my strength. Up on the mountains, the waterfalls make noises like the sound of trumpets; I'll stop doing the lovely spring a disservice by being sad. I can hear the mountains echoing, the winds seem to come straight out of the land of dreams, and the whole world is happy. The land and the ocean alike are jolly, and every living creature shares the joy of May. You, you happy child: yell joyously, and let me hear you yelling, you gleeful young shepherd!

You lucky, holy living things, I've heard you calling to one another; I can see heaven itself laughing with you as you celebrate. My heart rejoices with you, and my head feels crowned with your happiness: I feel your delight completely. It would be a terrible thing indeed if I were to sulk while the world dresses herself up so beautifully on this gorgeous May morning, and while children everywhere are picking flowers in thousands of valleys all across the world, and while the sun shines and little babies bounce in their mothers' arms. I hear all this celebration with delight! But: there's a single tree out of all the trees in the world, a single field I once saw: both of them remind me that something has gone missing for me. The little flower I see at my feet tells me the same thing. Where has that transcendent illumination I once saw gone? Where's that luminous dreamlike vision now?

When we're born, it's as if we fall asleep and forget where we came from: our souls, which are born with us, rising like little suns, came to earth from a different, far-off world. We don't come to this world having totally forgotten where we came from, and we don't come here as blank slates: we bring clouds of holy light in our wake when we come to the earth from our original home with God. When we're babies, we see heaven all around us! But as children grow up, the jail-like shadows of habit and familiarity begin to draw in around them. For a while, though, they can still see the light of heaven, and where it comes from, and feel its joy. Even as a young man grows up and moves farther and farther away from his origin in heaven, he's still a kind of holy man of nature's religion, and he's accompanied by his heavenly visions. But at last, when he becomes an adult, that special light fades away, and everything just looks mundane and normal.

The earth is full of its own kind of delights, and has its own natural longings. Like a well-intentioned adoptive mother, the caring earth does her best to make humans—who are at once her children and her prisoners—forget the beauties they once could see and the heaven they came from.

Look at the little kid among his newfound pleasures—an adorable little guy, only six years old and teeny-tiny. Look where he sits among his playthings, with his face covered in his mom's kisses and his dad's adoring gaze fixed on him. Look at the game he's planning out there on the floor—some scrap of his childish understanding of life that he's playing out with his new skills. He's playing pretend, acting out weddings and parties, sorrows and funerals, now getting caught up in one and then singing of another. Later, he'll play games to do with the worlds of business, or love, or war. But not for long: soon he'll toss those games aside, too, and proudly, like an actor, he'll take on another role, pretending in turn to go through every experience of human life, all the way up to old age. It's as if his entire purpose were to imitate all the different things grown-ups do.

You, little child, whose small body doesn't reveal the vastness of your soul; you, you wisest of scholars, who still has a connection to heaven, and who can still see what adults are blind to, as you silently look into the deep mysteries all around you, always shadowed by the presence of God: you powerful truth-teller, you holy prophet! You can see everything that we adults spend our whole lives trying to find—only to get lost in a darkness that is like death. But you, who are still so closely connected to your soul's origins that immortality hovers over you like the sun, or like a master over a servant, a mighty presence that can't be ignored; you little child, still glowing with the power that heaven shines down into your soul: why on earth do you so play all these games about adulthood, rushing to grow up and lose all that you have now? Why do you do all this unwitting harm to your sacred good fortune? Your soul will be weighed down with everyday, earthly things soon enough—and habit will crush you like a heavy, icy frost, getting deeper every day you're alive.

Thank goodness that in the burned-down remnants of our former childhood vision, some little spark still glows—and the beauty of nature allows us to *remember* those fleeting moments of glory. Thinking back on my childhood makes me feel constantly blessed—and not just for those good and worthy qualities, like fun and freedom, that mark out childhood days, or for childhood's optimism and hope. No, it's not these feelings for which I sing my song of gratitude, but for the way I once stubbornly questioned the everyday world; for the sense I had of certainties falling away and disappearing; for the way that, as a child, I could still see beyond the everyday and walk in a world of mysteries. My instinctive sense of holiness used to make my everyday certainties shake like a creature caught red-handed trying to get away with something. I'm grateful for humanity's first feelings of love for the world, and for our faint memories of that love; even if those memories are shadowy now, they're still a fountain of luminous joy, and the guiding light by which we can understand everything we see now. Those memories support us, care for us, and allow us to put all the chaos of day-to-day life into perspective, making the years feel small in comparison to eternity. Once we've perceived eternity in childhood, its truth stays with us and never goes away. Neither boredom nor striving, neither grown-up nor child—not even everything that opposes joy can completely get rid of our first memories of heaven. Thus, in peaceful moments, even when we're very far from our childhood seeing, we can still catch a glimpse of the ocean of eternity that brought our souls here; we can travel there in an instant, and watch children playing on that ocean's shores, and hear the eternal thunder of its waters.

So go ahead and sing happily, birds! And go ahead and hop around as if you're dancing to the music of drums, lambs! Even we grown-ups will, in our minds, join in with all of you who sing and play, who are still truly immersed in the joy of the spring. So what if the holy light I used to see in everything has been taken away from me forever? Even though nothing will ever bring back the time when we adults could see the grass and flowers shining with heavenly beauty, we won't mourn. Instead, we'll draw strength from everything that we *do* have: from our fundamental connection to nature, which never really goes away; from the consolations we discover when we endure pain; from our belief that death is not the end of the immortal soul; and from the long years of our life, which have taught us to think like philosophers.

And oh, you springs, fields, hills, and forests: god forbid that we should ever stop loving each other! I still feel your power in the deepest parts of my soul. All I've really given up is feeling that power all the time. I love the coursing streams now even more than I did when I danced as easily and joyfully as they do. The fresh shine of sunrise is still beautiful to me. And the clouds at sunset look even more profound to me now that I understand death. I'm playing a different game now than I was when I was a child, and hoping to win different rewards. Thanks to the deep

feelings all people steer their lives by—thanks to the heart's affections, its joys, and its fears—I can still look at the most ordinary little flower there is and be profoundly moved.

THEMES

THE SOUL'S IMMORTALITY

Wordsworth's poem argues that the human soul is everlasting. The speaker believes that the soul actually comes from heaven, where it exists before people are born, and that it will one day return there. The speaker finds a deep sense of comfort and inspiration in this idea that the soul is eternal, having always existed, and also immortal, going on after death.

The speaker finds evidence for the soul's immortality in the way children see the world. Looking back on his own childhood, the speaker remembers that the world used to look different, as if everything in nature were shining with its own "celestial light." In the speaker's view, this is because young children have only just arrived from heaven, and thus bring heavenly perceptions with them. That is, they can still see a sort of divine, heavenly presence in the physical world that now surrounds them.

The freshness and beauty that the speaker remembers seeing as a child strikes him as a sort of souvenir from his soul's earlier "home" in God. In other words, the way children perceive the world is an "intimation of immortality," a hint of what the speaker feels is the deepest truth there is: the human soul is not tied to the mortal body, and instead has its own joyful existence in heaven before it comes to earth.

It gets harder and harder to feel that connection with the eternal as one gets older, the speaker sighs: life is a process of moving further and further from one's heavenly origins, moving "daily farther from the East." But even this image, which alludes to the movement of the sun, suggests that after the soul"sets" in death, it will "rise" in heavenly glory again. The memory of his "celestial" childhood vision gives him a "faith that looks through death," a belief that the soul doesn't just come from heaven, but returns there—regardless of how final death might seem.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 51-57
- Lines 58-77
- Lines 78-85
- Lines 109-126
- Lines 130-168
- Lines 178-187

CHILDHOOD WONDER AND THE PAIN OF GROWING UP

The poem's speaker remembers that, when he was a child, the natural world was full of spectacular beauty and wonder. Sure, nature still looks "lovely" to him as an adult, but as a child, he remembers, he could see heavenly light shining in even the most common of plants. He has to work pretty hard not to be "sullen" about losing the ability to see the world this way, but maintains that it's simply the cost of growing up. The further people get from childhood, the speaker argues, the more used to the world they get, and the less they can perceive the world's intense, spiritual beauty. The poem presents this as a sad loss, but also as part of the natural order of things.

When he was a child, the speaker remembers, he saw the natural world as a place of immense wonder. Once upon a time, even ordinary grass shone with "splendour"; indeed, all of nature seemed to glow with "celestial light," illuminated with divine, supernatural beauty. This beauty, the speaker suggests, appears plainly to children both because they're not yet used to the world, and because their souls have recently arrived from heaven: they're still seeing the everyday world through the lens of their earlier heavenly existence.

But as people grow up, get familiar with the world, and move farther and farther away from their heavenly origins, this kind of vision fades. The routines and habits of daily life set in, and the world goes from looking enchanted to looking "common."

This is a painful loss! As an adult, the speaker can't help but feel like he's missing something important: he can still appreciate natural beauty, but the "visionary gleam" of childhood is gone forever.

There's no point in mourning this loss too hard, though: it's just a natural part of life. When the speaker turns away from his "grief" over the lost "visionary gleam" of childhood, he suggests that such grief "wrong[s]" the beauty of the spring day around him. Even if the loss of that "gleam" hurts, it's as natural as the changing seasons, and to resist it would be an insult to the order of the world. Everyone, the speaker says, slowly gets used to the day-to-day of human life until "custom" (familiarity or habit) makes the world seem ordinary. There's no way to avoid this: it's just part of the journey of human life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Lines 10-18
- Lines 19-35
- Lines 51-57
- Lines 58-77
- Lines 78-85
- Lines 86-108
- Lines 109-129
- Lines 130-168

- Lines 176-187
- Lines 188-204

THE CONSOLATIONS OF MEMORY

The poem's speaker feels he's lost a lot by growing up: when he was a child, nature seemed to shine with "celestial light" for him, but as an adult, that luminosity is just a memory. At the same time, he finds that such memories offer some consolation. While he mourns the beauty he could once see, he finds "strength in what remains behind": his memories of how he saw the world in childhood, and his adult "philosophic mind" that allows him to reflect on those memories.

Growing up and getting used to the wonder of the world, the poem suggests, is a sad but unavoidable part of being alive. But remembering that wonder from an adult perspective is the foundation of mature wisdom, hope, and faith.

Children, this speaker believes, instinctively see the world as a place full of heavenly beauty and wonder. While adults lose their ability to see the world this way, they never forget their memories of that kind of vision. The natural world reminds the speaker of what he used to be able to see there; a particular "Tree" and "a single Field" still speak to him of the heavenly beauty he saw shining in those specific places, once upon a time.

But the speaker's memories of childhood aren't just melancholy reminders of what once was: they're also a "master light," a guiding beacon of hope and faith. In other words, remembering the beauty and wonder he saw as a child makes him believe that his soul came from heaven—and will one day return there. Sometimes his memories can even take him right back to the verge of the wonder he's lost, so that he gets a reassuring glimpse of "the immortal sea"—that is, the endless and beautiful afterlife—he believes his soul will one day return to.

Heavenly childhood vision might be fleeting, the speaker suggests, but one's memories of that beautiful way of seeing can form the foundations of an adult faith in the soul's immortality. While the world doesn't shine quite so bright anymore, the speaker's recollection of its former "celestial light" mean that even "the meanest flower that blows" can still give him hope of an eternal life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 51-57
- Lines 130-168
- Lines 176-187
- Lines 188-204

THE BEAUTY AND DIVINITY OF NATURE

The poem suggests that, even after people lose the shining childhood vision that allows them to see all of nature illuminated with divine light, nature can still bring people close to the divine. Nature, to this speaker, isn't just a beautiful and consoling place, but a mirror of heaven itself. One doesn't need to be a visionary child to find hope, comfort, and inspiration in the natural world—nor to get a taste of a heavenly future there.

For the speaker, nature overflows with obvious beauty: "Waters on a starry night / Are beautiful and fair," he says plainly, and "lovely is the Rose"—these are just the facts! Nature isn't merely lovely either; it's aware of its loveliness. The "Moon" looks around with "delight" at the clear skies, and the birds "sing a joyous song," inviting humans to share in their happiness. The "heavens" themselves "laugh" as nature rejoices in its own loveliness, the speaker says: all that conscious beauty and delight is a reflection of the divine–that is, of a loving and joyful God.

In turn, the speaker imagines heaven as a natural landscape, as an "immortal sea," "clouds of glory," and the "east" where the sun rises. The sea's eternal vastness, the ethereal glow of clouds, and the "glorious birth" of the sunrise all evoke heaven's endless joy.

Since nature and the divine are mirror images of each other, when the speaker basks in the loveliness of the "Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves," he can feel a connection with heaven, even after he's lost his childhood ability to see nature shining with "celestial light."

Because it hints at the eternal joys of heaven, this poem argues, nature has the ability to connect even jaded adults with the divine. Even the "meanest flower that blows" (that is, the lowliest, commonest little blossom) can inspire the speaker with profound thoughts of heavenly eternity—thoughts like the ones that make up this very poem.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 10-16
- Lines 19-21
- Lines 25-33
- Lines 43-55
- Lines 72-73
- Line 78
- Line 164
- Lines 169-171
- Line 175
- Lines 178-179
- Lines 188-189
- Lines 193-199
- Lines 203-204

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-9

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

The Immortality Ode begins with a look back.

Wordsworth prefaces his Ode with a few lines from his earlier poem "My Heart Leaps Up"—lines that deal with the idea that the things people experience in childhood shape their lives as adults. The speaker of that poem—who, like the speaker here, is likely Wordsworth himself—goes on to hope that his whole life can reflect the "natural piety" he felt in childhood (that is, a sort of instinctive, inborn religious awe). That feeling is exactly what his Immortality Ode is about to explore.

"There was a time," this poem's speaker begins, when the whole world seemed to shine for him. Back in his childhood, everything in nature seemed "[a]pparelled in celestial light"—that is, dressed up in a glow that seemed to come from heaven itself. The language here is like something from a fairy tale: it's as if the speaker is saying, "Once upon a time, I lived in a magical land."

But this land was the "common," normal, everyday world. What was different before wasn't the world itself, but how it "seem[ed]" to the speaker. Then, everything had "the glory and the freshness of a dream." To really understand this line, the reader might want to reflect on a wonderful dream they had: think how vivid and memorable a good dream feels, how bright its images are, and how deeply connected you can feel to the pictures your dreams show you. The shining "glory" and "freshness" of that kind of dream was once this speaker's whole world.

Also take note of the word "glory": it's going to be very important, repeating all through this long poem. The word "glory" suggests, not just that the world once seemed to shine with light for the speaker, but that there was something magnificent, awe-inspiring, and holy about that light.

But then, something changed. Now, when the speaker looks around him, that "glory" is gone: the things he once saw he "now can see no more." What changed? He grew up.

This heartbreaking loss will be the central dilemma of this poem. Where, the speaker will wonder, does the special shine of childhood vision come from—and why does it vanish? How can adults resign themselves to life without that "glory"?

The speaker will explore these profound and deeply-felt questions in the form of an ode. Odes don't use a standardized meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, the speaker will allow his verse to grow organically around his ideas and his emotions.

The reader can already see that happening in the rhyme scheme here:

- As the speaker describes his childhood visions in lines 1-5, the rhymes fall into a steady, musical ABABA pattern (that is, alternating lines rhyme).
- But when he describes how things have changed for him in his adult life (lines 6-9), the pattern changes, and his CDDC rhymes seem to "turn" back and forth with him as he looks sadly around for any glimpse of the "glory" he's lost.

LINES 10-18

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

In the first stanza, the speaker reflected that no matter where he looks, he can no longer see the "glory" that surrounded him when he was a child. In the second stanza, he digs deeper into that idea:

- Sure, he says, he can still see that nature is beautiful—but there's still some extra gleam, some special light, that's gone missing. No matter how pretty rainbows and roses are, he still longs for the "celestial light" he used to see in them.

The second stanza starts to show readers how this poem will develop:

- Each stanza builds on the one before it, but it's also a self-contained thought.
- And each stanza uses different flavors of meter and rhyme to shape that thought.
- It's as though the speaker is holding up his central, complex question—why does our beautiful childhood vision disappear?—and examining it from many angles.

Here, he begins by presenting little "snapshots" of the beauty of nature in short, straightforward lines of iambic trimeter. That is, he uses lines of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

The Rain- | bow comes | and goes,
And love- | ly is | the Rose,

There's something matter-of-fact about these short lines. Rainbows indeed shimmer, fading in and out as one watches them; roses are indeed just plain "lovely."

Then the speaker gets a little more involved in his descriptions, and his thought carries on into a longer line of iambic tetrameter (*four* da-DUMs). (Note that Wordsworth would have pronounced "heavens" as one condensed syllable: "heav'ns"):

The Moon | doth with | delight
Look round | her when | the heavens | are bare,

Here, the speaker still even seems to feel some kinship with nature: he and that personified "Moon" are both taking a moment to look around admiringly at a clear sky.

He goes on this way for a few more lines, musing that the starry sky reflected in the water is "beautiful and fair" and that the sunshine is a "glorious birth," a metaphorical moment of new life that comes every day. All of these images feel soothing, beguiling, consoling: there's still plenty for the speaker to love in the natural world, and he can find hope, meaning, and connection in nature's beauty.

But there's a "but." At the end of the second stanza, the speaker can't help but come back to the same place he found himself at the end of the first stanza: knowing that, wherever he searches, he still can't find the lost "glory" that seems to have left the world. Take a look at the way he changes his meter to deliver that last, sad conclusion:

But yet | I know, | where'er | I go,
That there | hath passed | away | a glo- | ry from | the earth.

After all those relatively short and straightforward lines of description, this stanza's closing line of iambic hexameter (*six* da-DUMs) suggests that, no matter how much beauty the speaker can still see in the world, the missing "glory" is really what's taking up space in his mind and his heart.

LINES 19-26

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;

In the first two stanzas, the speaker looked back: first into his childhood, when everything seemed to shine, and then into his adult experiences of nature's beauty (and nature's *loss* of that former shine). This stanza changes the scene: now, it's "Now," and the speaker is writing from the midst of a beautiful spring.

Everything around him, on this gorgeous May morning, seems happy just to be alive:

- The birds aren't just singing, but singing a "joyous song," and the newborn lambs are hopping around as if they're dancing to a "tabor," a little drum.
- The lively imagery here suggests that the spring itself has its own kind of music, a beautiful melody that every living thing dances to.

Every living thing, that is, but the speaker. All "alone," he has a "thought of grief"—the very "grief" over his lost childhood vision that he's been examining over the course of the past two stanzas. It's not just his inability to see "celestial light" in nature that's making him sad here: it's his awareness that he's set apart from the beauty of the spring day *by* his sadness. There's no room for a gloomy aging poet at the lamb party.

All that he can do in the face of that grief is make "a timely utterance": that is, he has to promptly *express* his grief if he wants to get any "relief" from it. That "utterance" is the poem's first two stanzas! Writing those sad reflections down gives the speaker the strength to return to the present moment, where he sits in the sunlit spring countryside. Here, he can appreciate not only the melodic joy of the lambs and the birds, but the grandeur of the personified "cataracts" (or waterfalls) as they "blow their trumpets" from the mountainside.

Those dramatic trumpets are a wake-up call. To grieve amongst all this natural beauty, the speaker suggests, would be to "wrong" (or insult) the spring itself. He can't just give himself up to mourning his beautiful childhood visions forever. He still has to be a part of life, even if he's lost something deeply precious to him—and one of life's most distinctive qualities is that it *goes on*.

LINES 27-35

I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay;
Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday—
Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy
Shepherd-boy!

Having expressed his grief over his lost childhood vision, the speaker returns to the beauty of the spring day around him, determined to enjoy it as much as he can. But even as he

returns to the present moment, there are hints that he's still thinking back to the way the world looked to him in his youth:

- The first things he notices as he returns his attention to the day are the "echoes" that make their way through the surrounding mountains, and the "winds" that seem to blow towards him from the "fields of sleep."
- "Echoes," of course, are repetitions of a sound that has already ended: audible memories.
- And the breeze from those "fields of sleep" might be a gust from the dreamlike world the speaker remembers from his youth.
- Thus, even if he's accepted that "the glory and the freshness of a dream" has vanished from this landscape for him, he's still haunted by the thought of that glory.

But he starts to get swept up in the beauty around him, too. The whole world starts to seem like a single living creature to him:

- He feels that "all the earth is gay," or full of energetic joy.
- The "land" and the "sea" alike are delighted, and "every Beast" is celebrating the spring.
- The speaker's intense personification here suggests that, to him, the world seems not just beautiful, but *conscious* of its own beauty. The whole globe seems animated by a single shared life force. The "heart of May" is beating in everything.

At last, the speaker makes a direct apostrophe to the first fellow human he's encountered in this landscape, a "happy Shepherd-boy" whose "shouts" of laughter or delight might be creating those "echoes" he hears. The speaker eggs him on: "let me hear thy shouts," he cries. It's as if he's getting involved in the shared joy of the world around him, not exactly as a full participant, but as a spectator, cheering from the sidelines.

LINES 36-50

Ye blessed creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fullness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.
Oh evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
This sweet May morning,
And the Children are culling
On every side,
In a thousand valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm—
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!

In the beginning of the fourth stanza, the speaker doubles down on his attempts to fully enjoy the spring day around him. He's already tried to shake off his "grief" over not being able to see the spring through the eyes of childhood anymore. Here, he seems to be trying even harder, again reminding himself of everything lovely that he *can* see.

He starts with an apostrophe to all the spring creatures he's seen around him. He tells them that he can hear them calling to each other; he can see the "heavens" themselves taking part in their "jubilee"; in short, he fully appreciates what a joyful "festival" this beautiful day is for the lambs, the birds, and the laughing "Shepherd-boy." He even feels honored to witness all their delight, as if he's wearing a "coronal" (or crown) of happiness.

But he's still not all the way to feeling that joy himself. It's not "bliss" that he feels, but "the fullness of **your** bliss." In other words, he can deeply appreciate the happiness he perceives in the world around him, but he's not fully taking part in it.

Still, he tries to shake himself out of his lingering "sullen[ness]." It'd be downright wrong, he suggests, to sulk while children pick flowers, babies bounce in their mothers' arms, the sun shines, and the personified "Earth" herself is getting dressed up in her spring finery. In lines 42-49, the speaker even seems to take on a sort of God's-eye view of the spring: he doesn't just see one child, but children "in a thousand valleys far and wide" picking flowers. On the other hand, when he imagines the joyful energy of babies, he pictures them through a single, archetypal "Babe"—the perfect ideal of babyhood, cooing and wiggling.

In other words, he moves from trying to enjoy his immediate surroundings to trying to feel the joy of the spring in big, broad terms: to really feel that *everything* is caught up in wonder and delight.

It's as if he's trying to talk himself into that feeling, though. When he says, "**I hear**, **I hear**, with joy **I hear!**", his diacope on the words "I hear" feels both exuberant and insistent. It's like he's saying, "no—really—I feel it, I understand that spring is a glorious time! Really!"

But there's still just a little grain of "sullen[ness]" in all these imaginings of delight. It's like the old "don't think of an elephant" joke: in saying it would be wrong for him to be gloomy in the springtime, the speaker is admitting that he *is* a tiny bit gloomy, still, in spite of all spring's beauty. In the rest of this stanza, he'll consider why that is.

LINES 51-57

—But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet

Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

In the beginning of the fourth stanza, the speaker tries to fully feel the joy of the May morning that surrounds him. But now, at the end of that stanza, there's another "But."

Yes, the speaker says, the world in general is celebrating the lovely new life of spring. But there's one "Tree" and one "Field" in particular that catch his eye, and seem to "speak" to him, reminding him of "something that is gone." In other words, the speaker's attention gets pulled away from big, general ideas about springtime and renewal to personal, specific memories—memories of seeing that special "Tree" and that special "Field" through the lens of childhood "glory." His capitalization here make the Tree and Field feel even more distinct, as if they're named individuals.

- The speaker's emotions here make it almost seem as if he's gone through a tough breakup. Sure, there's plenty of joy and beauty in the world—but the experiences he had with that one Tree and that one Field were special, and the thought of them pulls him away from a more generalized celebration.

His rhyme scheme here evokes how insistent—and how elusive—his memories feel. Take a look at the way the rhymes move in lines 51-53:

—But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:

These three rhymes in a row call a lot of attention to themselves—just as the Tree and the Field call to the speaker. But there's also something just a little off here. "One" is a slant rhyme with "upon" and "gone," not a perfect rhyme. That slight difference speaks to the difference the speaker feels as he looks on that Tree and that Field now. He can remember exactly how beautiful and powerful his visions of these lovely things once was: but something is just different, these days. Something has been lost.

And as it turns out, it's not just something about that Tree and that Field. Even the common little "Pansy" the speaker sees when he looks down delivers the same message to him as those special places. All of these sights—and the whole natural world around him—bring him back to the same pressing questions:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

These moments of aporia take the speaker right back to the longing he reflected on at the beginning of the poem. The beauty of the spring just can't tear him away from wondering where his inspired childhood vision disappeared to.

Those questions also mark the end of the first section of the poem. Wordsworth wrote these first four stanzas in 1802. The rest of the poem records a process of thought that took him years; the remaining seven stanzas weren't completed until 1804. The rest of the poem will be a long, meditative answer to the questions he struggles with here.

LINES 58-66

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

The first four stanzas of the poem have explored the speaker's experiences: his memories of childhood's shining visions, and his present-day longing for those visions even in the midst of a beautiful spring. The fifth stanza sharply changes tack. Where the previous stanzas recorded impressions and asked questions, here the speaker begins with a bold philosophical statement: an explanation of where that glorious childhood vision comes from.

The human soul, the speaker says, doesn't appear out of nowhere. It's eternal. And before it's incarnated on this planet, it lives in "God, who is our home." In other words, souls leave an immortal life with God in heaven to come down to earth. And when they first get here, they still have memories of the heavenly eternity from which they came—memories that change the way they see the everyday world.

In fact, they don't just have memories. They come to earth "trailing clouds of glory." This mysterious moment of imagery is also a paradox: a "cloud" of shining "glory" feels like a contradiction in terms. But it's a strikingly beautiful one. The reader might imagine white-gold clouds streaming like the tail of a meteor behind the descending soul.

Listen to the weaving, harmonious sounds of the speaker's proclamation:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:

The speaker begins this passage with a lot of muted /n/ and crisp /t/, /g/, and hard /c/ consonance—then leaps off into the elongated /l/ sounds of "trailing clouds of glory" and the soft alliteration of "God, who is our home." This

movement—between small, clipped sounds and big, airy, wide-open ones—follows the poem's leap from the everyday world into a transcendent vision.

If children see differently (and more beautifully) than adults do, the speaker concludes, it's because "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" Children don't just see the world as shining and beautiful because they're new to it, in other words: they're actually seeing the world through the remembered light of heaven. The "glory" of their vision is a souvenir from paradise.

LINES 67-77

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy
But he
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

Children, the speaker has just finished saying, see the world in the light of heaven. But that kind of seeing doesn't last long. As soon as a person is born, they start moving "farther from the east"—that is, they start to grow up, and every day takes them a little further away from the sunlit eternity they came from. The longer a person lives, it follows, the more the "shades of the prison-house"—that is, the metaphorical shadowy "prison" of routine and habit—close in and block out the "clouds of glory" souls bring with them to earth.

But the "growing Boy" and the "Youth" (or teenager) retain some heavenly seeing, for a while. It's only the unfortunate "Man" who must finally suffer as his vision "fade[s] into the light of common day."

The many rich metaphors in this passage help the reader to feel the real emotional weight of this change:

- To this speaker, the "Youth" who can still perceive some divine light is "Nature's Priest," a holy man in a church made out of the whole world.
- And the adult feeling that life is routine and ordinary isn't just a disappointment: it's a "prison-house," a place where convicts are locked away from the light. There's perhaps even a sense of *guilt* in this metaphor, as if growing up is somehow a crime against heavenly truth.
- But the speaker's use of big, broad, general terms like "Boy," "Youth," and "Man"—and his image of these figures' inevitable journey—suggest that everyone commits this crime whether they want to or not. It's just how the world works: everyone "must travel" further and further away from their origins in heaven as time passes.

In other words, the speaker's longing for the way he used to see the world is fraught. It's matter of freedom versus imprisonment, light versus darkness: in short, a matter of life and death.

LINES 78-85

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her foster child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

The speaker presents adulthood as a time of loss and sorrow—and almost a crime against the beauty of his childhood visions—but he's resigned to this inevitable change. It's heartbreaking to lose one's heavenly way of seeing, he says, but it's the natural way of things.

That idea of a natural, inevitable, and even gentle loss turns up in this stanza in the form of a personified Earth. "Earth," in this speaker's imagination, tries to make up for all that people lose when they come to live with her; she's a kindly adoptive mother, caring for "her foster child," humanity. It's Earth's *job*, the speaker seems to say, to distract people from their memories of heaven, and Earth longs to welcome them with "pleasures of her own."

But while the language here is at first glance gentle and soothing, it's also quietly ambivalent. Sure, the Earth has "something of a Mother's mind" as she looks after the souls that fall into her care, and her "aim" isn't "unworthy" (faint praise!). But when she takes human souls into her care, they become not just her "foster child[ren]," but her "Inmate[s]." The word "inmate" can simply mean "a member of a household"—but it can also mean "prisoner."

Remembering the metaphorical "prison-house" of the previous stanza, the reader might well sense a little discomfort in the relationship the speaker imagines between the motherly Earth and her foster-children here. Earth's love might be smothering. And her goal is to make people "forget" the "glories" of heaven.

In the next stanza, the speaker will look at exactly how that forgetting comes about.

LINES 86-99

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pygmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!

See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song;
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;

Having spent the last couple of stanzas laying out his philosophy of youthful heavenliness versus adult "imprisonment" in habit, the speaker here provides a concrete example. Like the Ghost of Christmas Present, he ushers readers into a house to look at an instructive scene: "Behold," he commands.

He's asking readers to look at a little "Child" as he plays on the floor. This kid is the picture of sweetness, absolutely lovable: he's a "six years' Darling," and he's the apple of his parents' eyes.

In fact, perhaps there's even an echo of earlier ideas about the Earth as a "mother" and God as a divine light here: this little boy is "fretted" (which could mean either annoyed or completely covered) with his mother's endless kisses, and his father's adoring gaze shines "light" upon him. Even this everyday family situation has echoes of the bigger, grander themes the speaker has been looking at.

But this little kid doesn't know any of that. He's completely wrapped up in playing pretend, acting out a "dream" of the "human life" he hasn't experienced for himself yet. The speaker lays out those imaginary events like this:

A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song;

The parallelism here suggests that the seemingly opposite events the little boy acts out—joy on the one hand, grief on the other—are really just two sides of the same coin. To this innocent child, all the experiences he'll go through in life are part of the same fun game, interesting scenes to play out in anticipation. Thinking back on the previous stanza, the reader might get the impression that this kind of game is how "Earth" starts to get people's attention, drawing them away from their memories of heaven.

LINES 100-108

But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part;
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

As soon as the little boy picks up one game, he tosses it aside for a new one. As he plays, he's trying out every single episode of human life ahead of time.

The speaker draws his metaphors here from the theater. The little boy is an "Actor," and he's populating his "stage" with all the roles a person plays in their life. The idea that the world is a theater and people are actors alludes to the famous "seven ages of man" speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

- In this speech, the melancholy (and rather cynical) nobleman Jaques imagines that "all the world's a stage," and lays out the "roles" people play over time, from the innocent baby to the decrepit senior.
- If we live to old age, Jaques gloomily concludes, we only end up "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

This allusion suggests that the speaker finds this child's game both touching and a little sad. Playing out the game of life all the way "down to palsied Age" means that this tiny kid is coming into contact with the painful reality that all human life leads to old age (if we're lucky) and death (no matter what). And the child is meeting this truth long before he has the capacity to really understand what that means. To him, it's all a game.

And it's a game he seems born to play. It's as if, the speaker says, "his whole vocation / Were endless imitation": playing out what he sees around him seems to be his whole cause in life. Anyone who's watched (or been!) a little kid playing pretend will recognize this description. There's something fascinating and absorbing about this kind of "acting."

LINES 109-121

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted forever by the eternal mind—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;

In the previous stanza, the speaker described an everyday scene: a little kid playing pretend, acting out every stage of adult life. Now, the speaker looks at that scene through very

different eyes—and in very different language.

This whole stanza will be a dramatic apostrophe to that little kid, addressing him in the grandest and most solemn terms. The same child whom the speaker imagined as a "six years' darling" in the previous stanza here becomes a "Philosopher," a "Mighty Prophet," and a "Seer." In fact, not until line 122 will the speaker address the child flat-out as a "Child"; up until then, the reader might even believe that he's talking to some new figure in the poem.

All these impressive titles return to the poem's central ideas about the power of childhood vision. Everything the speaker says about this child here touches on the child's ability to see, to perceive, and to contact the inborn wisdom he's brought to earth from his immortal soul's recent time in heaven.

Remember those "clouds of glory" back in line 64—the heavenly light that the speaker feels all souls bring to earth with them? It turns out that, in the speaker's estimation, they don't just make the world look especially lovely to children. More than that, they convey a deep understanding of the nature of "the eternal deep" and "the eternal mind"—that is, of the infinite depths of God himself.

In other words: children, to this speaker, have a kind of priceless, immediate contact with God that adults inevitably lose, then spend "all [their] lives" trying to recover.

This might feel familiar to readers who've read the first chapters of the biblical book of Genesis (or one of the many, many books that retell that story, like *Paradise Lost* or *His Dark Materials*). It's a version of the Eden story, in which the first humans eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, become self-conscious, anger God, and get cast out of Paradise.

Growing up, the speaker suggests, is just this kind of "fall from grace." Gaining adult understandings of the world means losing one's more primal (and truthful) contact with the divine. It's the child's very innocence that makes him a powerful "Seer."

The speaker's metaphors and similes here paint a rich and complicated picture of what it means for children to bear that kind of knowledge. Take a look, for instance, at lines 112-114:

> [...] thou Eye among the blind,
> That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
> Haunted forever by the eternal mind—

There's a lot going on here! If the child is a piercing, seeing "Eye among the blind," he's also "deaf and silent": he can *see* deeply into the "eternal mind" of God, and even "read[]" it like a book, but he can't communicate it in language.

And a child's understanding isn't just beautiful, but awesome, inescapable, and maybe verging on frightening: it "Haunt[s]" him. Children's "Immortality" hangs over them not just like the light of "Day," but like "a Master o'er a Slave," inescapable and mighty.

LINES 122-129

> *Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might*
> *Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,*
> *Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke*
> *The years to bring the inevitable yoke,*
> *Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?*
> *Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,*
> *And custom lie upon thee with a weight,*
> *Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!*

After the long passage of grand apostrophe that begins stanza 8, the speaker at last gets more direct: "Thou little Child," he says, making it clear that, all along, he's been talking to the same "six years' darling" he pictured playing pretend back in stanza 7.

Here, the speaker stops expressing his amazement at the child's power to see directly into the "eternal mind" of God, and begins instead to ask the child some tormented rhetorical questions:

- Since you have this direct and "glorious" connection to God, the speaker asks, why on earth do you play all these games about being an adult? You're getting ahead of yourself! You'll be a grown-up soon enough, whether you like it or not, and you'll lose the special vision you have now—so why waste your youth pretending to be grown?

The implication here is that part of childhood's glorious vision is being innocent *about* that vision. In other words, the child doesn't even know that he has a special power to see and understand divine light.

Sight has been an important symbol all through this poem, representing the instinctive childhood understanding of the divine that the speaker longs for so intensely. Here, the speaker delves even deeper into that symbolism. While the child is in one way an "Eye among the blind" in his ability to see this light, he's also "blindly" blundering *away* from that ability in his impatience to be a grown-up.

- The polyptoton here suggests that childhood is a tragically ironic time: the child can see the light of God, but can't *see* that he can see! His innocence both allows him to contact the divine and means that he doesn't know he's going to lose that contact.

But he will. Adulthood, the speaker warns, descends on children like a crushing metaphorical weight. Take a look at the similes he uses to close this harrowing stanza:

> Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
> And custom lie upon thee with a weight,

Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

Here, the weight of "custom" (or habit and familiarity) isn't just a heavy burden, but a *cold* one, a wintry "frost" that contrasts with the newborn "May" of the poem's first four stanzas. And if it's "deep almost as life," that frost starts accumulating not long after one is born. The years, in other words, have a chilling, deadening effect, and they never stop accumulating. Time is merciless.

LINES 130-139

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That Nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast—

The speaker has been lost in sorrowful thought about the way that children lose their shining vision before they even know they have it. In this stanza, his mood seems sharply to change: "O joy!" he begins.

His joy comes from the thought that, even though everyone loses their divine vision as they grow, they can still *remember* it. He describes this kind of memory in richly metaphorical language, imagining the adult soul as the "embers" of childhood's glorious fire: the flames might have died down, he suggests, but there's still a glow somewhere deep inside.

Those embers stay alive with the help of a personified "Nature"—which here can mean both human nature and the natural world. This line might remind readers of that special "Tree" and "Field" back in lines 51-52, parts of nature which do seem to "remember" some special experience that the speaker shared with them.

But it might also suggest that there's something about the soul's "nature" that preserves childhood memories. Here, the soul's "nature" and external "Nature" seem to be intimately connected, sharing the common goal of helping adults to remember their youthful visions. The personification here makes that point even clearer: Nature, like the soul, seems to have its own thoughts and intentions.

With Nature's assistance, the speaker is able to look back on his childhood memories with intense gratitude, blessing them with "perpetual benediction." But he's not thinking of the kinds of memories the reader might expect:

- It's not the simple pleasures of childhood he has in mind, not the "delight and liberty" of being a fun-loving little kid with no responsibilities.
- It's not even childhood optimism, the "new-fledged hope" of youthful dreams and ambitions.
- These pleasures are certainly wonderful and "worthy to be blest," he observes—but the memories that give him real "joy" are a different kind.

He'll spend the rest of this stanza exploring the nature of those sacred memories.

LINES 140-148

Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised;

The speaker isn't grateful for standard-issue memories of childhood fun, he continues, but rather for a subtler, stranger quality of youth. As a child, the speaker says, he took nothing for granted: he stubbornly questioned the world, never accepting "sense and outward things" at face value. Everyday reality seemed to be a mere cover for some deeper, stranger truth.

He communicates this mysterious idea in mysterious language. Take a look at the sequence of rhymes he uses here:

[...] those obstinate **questionings**
Of sense and outward **things**,
Fallings from us, **vanishings**;

All these rhyme words are slippery, abstract plural nouns: questionings and vanishings, not things you can grasp! Even the more concrete "outward things" of the world are still just "things," mysterious and nameless objects.

The language here suggests that the experience the speaker remembers with "joy" here is a kind of not-knowing. In other words: another important thing about being a kid is that you don't just accept the world as a matter-of-fact reality. Anything might vanish or transform before your eyes—including your own self.

In a preface to this poem, Wordsworth once wrote about how, as a child, he'd feel the need to "grasp at a wall or a tree" sometimes, feeling as if he might fall out of reality into "the abyss of idealism," a realm in which there was no separation between him and the world. Back then, he wrote, he was frightened of that experience; it's only in looking back on it as an adult that he can appreciate it as a moment when he got close to a kind of divine unity.

In other words: it takes an adult perspective to *understand*

these experiences of not-knowing. In blessing his memories, the speaker isn't just longing for a lost experience anymore. He's grateful, instead, that he can *interpret* his childhood memories with adult wisdom.

That idea comes into focus in lines 147-148, where the speaker praises those old "questionings" and "vanishings" as "high instincts"—that is, as noble and truthful intuitions about the way things really are. They even have the power to make "our mortal Nature"—that is, our human understanding that we'll one day die—"tremble" as if it had been caught trying to get away with something. This is an adult interpretation of a childhood experience.

It's also the very heart of the poem. The idea that mortality itself shakes in its boots at children's power to question outward reality is exactly the kind of "intimation of immortality" the title suggests. In other words, it's a hint that the soul itself might be part of an eternal world hidden behind external reality—one that children can intuit, and adults can imagine with the help of their childhood memories.

LINES 149-161

But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!

The first lines of this stanza explained that it's not the obvious delights of childhood—like fun and freedom—that the speaker is grateful for. Rather, he pours "perpetual benediction" on children's sense of infinite possibility. Not yet familiar (nor bored) with the world, children are able to feel that reality might be a lot deeper and stranger than it looks on the surface.

Now, the speaker starts to think about how *remembering* that childhood feeling of mystery and unknowing has helped him to form his adult faith and wisdom. Even in the form of distant "shadowy recollections," he says, these memories are shining beacons. They're "the fountain light of all our day": a nourishing wellspring of illumination that reminds even jaded adults that there's more to the world than its humdrum surface.

Take a look at the speaker's parallelism as he unfurls this grand idea:

But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;

The metaphorical "light" of these memories, these parallel lines suggest, is at once a "fountain" and a "master," a quenching spring and an authoritative guide. It's joyfully overflowing, and it's calmly powerful. In other words, it has a lot in common with the speaker's earlier visions of heaven and God!

And not only does the "light" of these memories resemble the light of heaven, but it also protects and "cherish[es]" those who turn to it, like a loving parent. It has the power to remind people that all their "noisy years"—those same busy, accumulating years the speaker imagined back in stanzas 7 and 8— are just a blip in the "eternal Silence."

Once someone understood those "truths," the speaker goes on, they'll never leave them:

- Neither "listlessness, nor mad endeavour"—that is, neither lazing around nor frantically working—can completely overwrite the deep insight one gains from childhood memory.
- Not even "all that is at enmity with joy"—the forces of evil and misery themselves—can take that "fountain light" away.

This is a major revolution in the speaker's thought. The first eight stanzas of the poem were all about the tragic, irretrievable loss of childhood vision. Now, the speaker stands up to make a claim for the power of that vision—even after it's gone. Merely *remembering* childhood visions of glory and mystery is enough to support people through "all our day."

And in fact, there's something profound, moving, and important about *losing* childhood vision. The speaker's guiding light here isn't his childhood vision itself: it's his *memory* of it. In other words: he has to let that vision go in order to understand what it really means, and value it for what it really was.

LINES 162-168

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Over the course of this stanza, the speaker has been through a revolution in his thoughts. From longing for his childhood visions of the world, he's turned to a belief that *memories* of that vision are the foundation of his adult hope, faith, and wisdom—the "fountain light" that consoles and guides him.

Back in stanza 5, the speaker imagined life as a metaphorical

journey—a slow, sad, inevitable trip that takes people further and further from their origins in heaven. Then, he imagined this as a journey "daily farther from the east," envisioning heaven and God as the place where the sun rises.

Now, in a new extended metaphor, the speaker compares heavenly eternity to an ocean:

- Even as people make their journey far "inland," he says, their "Souls" can still catch "sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither."
- Not only that, but souls can "travel" back to that sea in a mere moment. It only takes a glimmer of remembered "fountain light" to remind people that deep, mysterious, eternal truth is still right there behind the everyday.

There's still something poignant about this image. When the speaker imagines getting a glimpse of that "immortal sea," he's a spectator again, as he was when he watched the "lambs" and "birds" back in stanza 3. He can *watch* "Children"—who, remember, are still immersed in their heavenly visions—playing on the beach, but he's not *among* them. And yet, there's also deep hope and consolation here. When the speaker's soul travels back to this shore, he can hear the "mighty waters" of the great sea "rolling evermore," continuing their grand eternal work.

By presenting his new understanding as a metaphorical landscape, the speaker gestures to what's changed in him. He's developed a new *view*—a new *perspective*. And it's taken a "journey" to get there—the journey not just through years of life, but through the stanzas of this very poem.

LINES 169-175

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts today
Feel the gladness of the May!

In stanza 9, the speaker came to a richer and more mature understanding of his sorrows. Losing childhood vision, he found, is inevitable and painful—but *remembering* childhood vision connects adults with profound truths about life (and the eternal afterlife).

Equipped with this new wisdom, he returns yet again to exactly where he was at the beginning of the poem: in the countryside, on a fresh May morning. Once more, he turns to the joyful, dancing creatures around him and eggs them on—but this time, his heart's really in it; at last, he's caught up in the world, at ease with the way things are.

To make his new understanding of the same world even clearer, he repeats exactly the same images (and a lot of the same language) that he used in stanza 3. And when he describes the birdsong, his giddy diacope and polyptoton make it seem as if he's singing right along:

> Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
> And let the young Lambs bound
> As to the tabor's sound!

Just as before, the speaker knows that he's not in exactly the same position as the joyful young creatures around him: he can only join them "in thought," not with his whole being. But he's also not alone. It's not just *he* who will join those creatures in his mind, but "we": every single grown-up reading this poem is invited to "feel the gladness of the May" along with him.

In other words: this speaker's thoughts have made him feel at home in the world, accompanied by all the other human souls who have gone through exactly the same loss that he's suffered.

In accepting (and appreciating) the ways in which his life has changed as he's gotten older—and in learning to put his faith in his *memories* of the "immortal sea" of eternity—the speaker has found a new, richer, deeper way to experience adult life.

LINES 176-187

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now forever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

In the last lines of stanza 10, the speaker sums up all that he's discovered since he first wondered where the "visionary gleam" of his childhood disappeared to. There's still sorrow in his voice here. He knows that the "radiance which was once so bright" is truly gone "forever": so long as he lives, he'll never recover the way he saw the world when he was young.

But there's great joy, too, and it appears even in the language of his sorrow. Listen to the music of these lines:

> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;

The shining imagery the speaker uses here is in the service of a lament: the "splendour" and "glory" he once saw in nature are *gone*. But there's also "splendour" and "glory" in the ringing

beauty of these very words. The poem itself is evidence of what the speaker has *gained* by growing up, the philosophy and the power he's achieved. Earlier in the poem, the speaker reflected that little children might be brilliant "Seer[s]," but they're also "deaf and silent": they can't communicate what they see. What the speaker has lost in vision, he has gained in speech.

Expressing what he's lost in soaring language thus becomes a way for the speaker to reach out to the "immortal sea" that sustains him. Just as "a timely utterance" of poetry gave him "relief" back in stanza 3, the speaker's expression of loss here allows him to deeply connect with his faith.

He'll no longer mourn over what he's lost, he says. Instead, he'll draw "strength" from "what remains behind":

- The unquenchable "primal sympathy" he feels with nature and the divine;
- The wisdom and consolation he's gained through enduring "human suffering";
- The "faith that looks through death"—that is, his deep belief that death isn't the end, founded on his childhood intuitions;
- And "years that bring the philosophic mind": the wisdom of adulthood.

This stanza, with its grand proclamation of "faith" and "strength in what remains behind," is not just *about* the "philosophic mind" the speaker has gained in adulthood: it's drawn from that mind's deepest wells.

LINES 188-192

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.

At last, the speaker begins his final stanza, using apostrophe by directly addressing the landscape itself. Often, in this poem, he's spoken for everyone, in grand philosophical statements about the nature of all human life. At the end of the poem, though, he gets intensely personal.

All through the poem, the speaker has lamented his lost visions. But here, he hopes that his connection to the places he saw those visions—the natural world—will never truly be "sever[ed]." Deep down, he says, he still feels all the glory of nature; he's only really given up *always* seeing that glory, living under its "more habitual sway" (or more constant power).

And the love he feels for nature seems to be mutual. It's not *his* love that he hopes won't be cut off, but "our loves," a sense of deep connection in which the "Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves" love him right back. There's an echo here of all the times he's personified nature before, imagining it as a conscious force that shares the "gladness of the May."

This is a subtly different angle on the problem the speaker has been grappling with. Before, he explored the idea that, in childhood, people saw nature through the "clouds of glory" they brought with them from heaven. Here, he seems to suggest that some of that glory lives *inside* the landscape, ready to reveal itself even to weary adult eyes—just not as readily as it reveals itself to children.

Or perhaps there's something even subtler going on here. In stanza 10, the speaker made a grand claim for all the consolations of adulthood. It's the wisdom of the "philosophic mind," he insists, that allows grown-ups to interpret their memories as "intimations of immortality," hints of a glorious Great Beyond.

Perhaps it's by reconciling himself with adulthood in this way that he can *realize* that he still has a loving connection to natural divinity in his "heart of hearts." The repetition here suggests that he's coming into contact with something in the very deepest part of him, his innermost kernel—his soul itself.

- In other words: recognizing that his experience has changed as he's grown also allows him to understand the ways in which his experience remains the same.
- The soul that came to earth "trailing clouds of glory" is still there inside him—and the touch of the divine that brings nature to loving life is still there *outside* him.

LINES 193-200

I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a newborn Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.

While his adult visions of nature are different from his childhood ones, the speaker says, they can still be glorious, fulfilling, and loving. In fact, his love has in some ways become deeper and richer as he's grown older.

The speaker seems to be thinking back to stanza 2. There, he qualified his appreciation for the lovely "Rose" and the clear brightness of "waters on a starry night" with his fretful awareness that "there hath passed away a glory from the earth." Now, as he looks at the natural beauty around him, he doesn't feel what he's missing, but what he's gained.

He even refers directly back to one of the images he used in that earlier stanza—but his metaphor has subtly transformed:

- Back in line 16, he imagined sunlight as "a glorious

birth"—a grand and mystical rebirth on a cosmic scale, a matter for awe.
- Now, he delights in the "innocent brightness" of "a newborn day," with the kind of lovestruck tenderness you'd feel for a baby.
- In other words, he's able to appreciate not just the grandeur of the sunrise, but its "lovely" normalcy. Just as there's nothing more normal and nothing more miraculous than a baby, there's nothing more ordinary or more wonderful than the way the sun just keeps on rising every day.

This image also calls to mind the ways in which the speaker has reconciled himself to the passage of time. After all, he's seen quite a few sunrises by now.

Something similar is going on in his first image, of the "Brooks" (or streams):

- Looking at the lively waters, he recalls the hop-skipping energy of childhood, remembering that he once "tripped" (or danced) "lightly as they."
- Now, he's able to love them "even more" than when he *shared* that energy. He's seeing the brooks with an almost parental affection here, appreciating their sweet childishness as a loving observer.
- But he's also able to appreciate that the brooks "fret" their "channels"—that is, that their waters wear away at their banks, shaping them and patterning them.
- In other words, the brooks, like the speaker, change with time—while still preserving some joyful, eternal youthfulness.

The speaker's third image here works a little differently. Both the "newborn Day" and the "Brooks" were images of lively young energy appreciated through mature eyes. But when the speaker looks at "the Clouds that gather round the setting sun," he sees nature reflecting *age* as well as youth:

- The "setting sun" is, of course, an ancient symbol of death—just as the rising sun is a symbol of "glorious birth."
- Watching a beautiful sunset, then, it makes sense that the speaker should see a "sober" (or serious) "colouring" in the clouds. His "eye," which has gotten well-acquainted with "mortality," can read the inevitability of death in the clouds' beauty.

But there's something even subtler going on here. Think back to the last time the speaker used the word "clouds," way back in line 64. Then, those clouds were the "clouds of glory" that comes "trailing" behind the soul as it makes its journey from heaven to earth. Now, think of a sunset. Imagine the way that the clouds blaze: golden, fuchsia, hot pink, crimson. Pretty *glorious*, isn't it?

If the speaker sees the "sober colouring" of "mortality" in those clouds, he's also seeing a reminder that, in his "heart of hearts," he believes that the soul comes from heaven, and returns there. Death will just mean a reunion with those "clouds of glory." The sun sets—but it rises, too.

"Another race hath been, and other palms are won," the speaker concludes. Those palms (an ancient symbol of both victory and immortality) are the rewards of embracing life on its own terms: in other words, accepting change and death, without losing one's "shadowy recollections" of eternity. It's only through this acceptance that one can develop a faith that what's lost isn't lost forever.

LINES 201-204

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

The Immortality Ode has gazed into a heavenly eternity, but it ends with its feet planted firmly on the ground. Listen to the speaker's anaphora as he plunges into the last four lines of the poem:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,

He's working up to a final expression of his philosophy, and his repetition works like a drumroll, creating a swelling sense of anticipation. He's preparing the way for some grand conclusion.

But look at what he's crediting here: not God or eternity or the divine, but the plain old "human heart." This whole poem has ultimately been less about the nature of the divine, and more about the way the humble, earthbound heart *approaches* the divine. Everyone's planted here on the ground, the speaker seems to say. And it's only through people's "tenderness," "joys," and "fears" that they can understand anything at all.

There's still some grandeur here: the speaker has returned to big claims about every "human heart," not just his own. But the poem's very last lines get humble, quiet, and personal:

- "To me," the speaker concludes, even the "meanest" (or lowliest) flower can inspire "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."
- In other words, the most common, everyday little daisy or dandelion can move him profoundly, in some part of him that's even deeper down than emotion.
- In looking to the ground where that "meanest flower" blooms, the speaker is finding a connection with his own roots, an inexpressible soul-deep *knowing* of the way things are.

That "meanest flower" might take the reader back to the personified "Pansy" that spoke to the speaker in lines 54-55, reminding him of "something that is gone." Maybe he's hearing that message in a new way now. But the "meanest flower" also suggests that the speaker has thoroughly come to terms with the reality of his life. Understanding mortality, accepting the passage of time, he knows that he's as earthbound, ordinary, fragile, and transient as that little blossom.

Listen to the way he deepens that idea with assonance:

> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

The long /ee/ sound links the "me," the speaker, to that "meanest" (or lowliest) flower, and the "tears" of intense feeling to the "deep" part of the soul that's way down past even the most heartfelt emotion. In feeling his likeness to that little flower, the speaker also profoundly feels his connection to everything that is.

The poem ends on the word "tears." But these are tears of sorrow and joy at once. To live a full human life, this poem finally suggests, is to live in a paradox. It's to see the divine in the ordinary, gain in loss, the universal in the personal, the eternal in the transient, and glory in the clouds.

SYMBOLS

SPRING

Spring symbolizes everything the speaker celebrates in this poem: new life, resurrection, and immortality. Of course, this speaker is far from the first person to see spring this way: the idea that spring is a symbolic time for resurrections, revelations, and redemptions is so old that it turns up in holidays from Easter to Passover to Ramadan.

As the speaker enjoys the May morning around him, everything he sees suggests beautiful new life. All the living creatures he encounters—lambs, birds, flowers, babies—are young, lovely, and joyful. They remind him that new life returns every year after the long "death" of winter—and suggest to him that the human soul is also like the spring, rising again into "glory" after death.

These springy images might carry an even deeper symbolic meaning for Wordsworth, who developed a deepening Christian faith during the years he was working on this poem. Those "lambs," for instance, might evoke Christ himself, sometimes known as the sacrificial "lamb of God," who dies only to be reborn into eternal life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** "Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song, / And while the young lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound,"
- **Lines 30-33:** " Land and sea / Give themselves up to jollity, / And with the heart of May / Doth every Beast keep holiday—"
- **Lines 42-49:** " Oh evil day! if I were sullen / While Earth herself is adorning, / This sweet May morning, / And the Children are culling / On every side, / In a thousand valleys far and wide, / Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm, / And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm—"
- **Lines 54-55:** " The Pansy at my feet / Doth the same tale repeat:"
- **Lines 86-87:** "Behold the Child among his new-born blisses, / A six years' Darling of a pygmy size!"
- **Lines 169-175:** "Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song! / And let the young Lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound! / We in thought will join your throng, / Ye that pipe and ye that play, / Ye that through your hearts today / Feel the gladness of the May!"

LIGHT

Light is this poem's most powerful and complex symbol, standing for holiness, deep understanding, guidance, truth, and joy.

To this speaker, the "celestial light" he remembers seeing in the natural world as a child is an image of the very deepest truth: that every human soul is immortal, part of a heavenly eternity. Children see the world in that light, the speaker argues, because they're newly arrived from heaven; the glow they see in nature is a souvenir they bring to earth from paradise. Alas, as people grow up, that light fades, and everyone gets left in the dark "shades" of habit instead.

But that light is still a powerful reminder of God's "glorious" beauty and benevolence. Even though the speaker only has memories of the light he saw in childhood to go by now, he still imagines it as the "master light" that guides him, helping him to have faith that he'll return to "God, who is our home" one day.

To see the world in this beautiful light is both to have a deep knowledge of the way the universe works, and to feel blessed by that knowledge.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparelled in celestial light,"

- **Line 5:** “ The glory and the freshness of a dream.”
- **Lines 17-18:** “ But yet I know, where'er I go, / That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.”
- **Lines 56-57:** “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?”
- **Line 59:** “The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,”
- **Lines 64-65:** “trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home:”
- **Lines 67-70:** “Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy / But he / Beholds the light, and whence it flows,”
- **Lines 72-75:** “The Youth, who daily farther from the east / Must travel, still is Nature's Priest, / And by the vision splendid / Is on his way attended;”
- **Line 84:** “the glories he hath known,”
- **Line 90:** “With light upon him from his father's eyes!”
- **Lines 116-118:** “ On whom those truths do rest, / Which we are toiling all our lives to find, / In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;”
- **Lines 150-153:** “ Those shadowy recollections, / Which, be they what they may, / Are yet the fountain light of all our day, / Are yet a master light of all our seeing;”
- **Lines 176-179:** “What though the radiance which was once so bright / Be now forever taken from my sight, / Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;”

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Moments of assonance help to give the poem its poignant music. (We've only highlighted a selection of assonant moments here; there's much more to find!)

For instance, listen to the vowel sounds in the poem's final lines:

> Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

The plaintive long /ee/ sound that threads through these final lines evokes the speaker's emotion and insight as he communes with a flower. That /ee/ links "me," the speaker, to that "mean[]" (or lowly) flower—and also to his "fears," his "tears," and his "deep[est]" insights.

The sounds thus reflect what's going on here: the speaker is feeling an intense connection with even this most ordinary little bit of nature, seeing himself in it—and thus coming into contact with a profound truth about life. Through this flower, he can feel that nature, the "human heart," and eternity are all mysteriously linked.

A tiny spark of assonance does similar work earlier on in the poem, too:

> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:

There are just a couple of echoing vowels here: the /ay/ of "nakedness" and "trailing," and the /uh/ of "come" and "from." But those subtle repetitions helps to create the effect that the speaker is launching into the heavens in these lines. First, he leaps from the humility of "utter nakedness" to the splendor of "trailing clouds of glory"; then, he suggests the ease and simplicity with which souls "come / From God."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “meadow,” “grove”
- **Line 3:** “me,” “seem”
- **Line 4:** “celestial”
- **Line 5:** “freshness”
- **Line 22:** “me,” “came,” “grief”
- **Line 23:** “gave”
- **Line 25:** “steep”
- **Line 26:** “grief,” “season”
- **Line 27:** “hear,” “through”
- **Line 28:** “to,” “fields,” “sleep”
- **Line 33:** “Beast,” “keep”
- **Line 34:** “Thou”
- **Line 35:** “Shout,” “round,” “thou”
- **Line 202:** “fears”
- **Line 203:** “me,” “meanest”
- **Line 204:** “deep,” “tears”

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's many apostrophes—to the landscape, to various "Beast[s]," and to an imagined "little Child"—give the poem a passionate, personal flavor. The speaker's direct addresses suggest that he feels that everything around him is, in some mysterious way, alive and in communication with his soul.

At the beginning of the last stanza, for example, the speaker cries out to the whole world:

> And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
> Forebode not any severing of our loves!

Here, the speaker personifies those "Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves" as if they're living creatures. If he can address them so intimately, they can also respond to him, returning his "love[]." It's in part through this sense that the

world speaks and can be spoken to that the speaker evokes his "faith that looks through death": his belief that external reality conceals a deep, benevolent, eternal consciousness.

By addressing the creatures around him, the speaker also brings *himself* into clearer view, reminding readers of the deep-thinking soul behind these words. For instance, consider the poem's very first apostrophe, which appears in lines 34-35:

> Thou Child of Joy,
> Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy
> Shepherd-boy!

Encouraging the "happy Shepherd-boy" to shout with delight, the speaker himself is *also* shouting—that is, calling out, getting involved. He may no longer be able to directly *experience* the boy's joyful connection with the world, but he's certainly able to *appreciate* it, and to want the boy to feel all that he himself cannot.

But the poem's longest and most dramatic apostrophe comes in stanza 8. In fact, it's *all* of stanza 8. In this long passage, the speaker addresses a "Mighty prophet," a grand figure who turns out to be none other than the six-year-old kid from the previous stanza. The speaker asks this kid a tortured question: why do you keep pretending to be an adult when you play? You'll be one soon enough, and you'll lose all your glorious childhood vision—just like I did.

Of course, if the speaker were *actually* to say any of this to a six-year-old, the six-year-old would have no idea what he was talking about. And that's exactly the point. This apostrophe gets at a deep irony of human life as the speaker sees it:

- Little kids, in his view, have the prophetic power to see the whole world in the light of heaven—but they're "deaf and silent," unable to *communicate* that vision or to "hear" an adult explanation of it.
- The speaker, meanwhile, can no longer see "celestial light" in nature—but he sure can write about what it was like, how much he misses it, and what it meant to him.
- The child can't hear, then, and the adult can't see!

It's no accident that, right after this apostrophe falls on the child's "deaf" ears, the speaker reaches a new understanding. It's only adult wisdom, he at last concludes, that can *interpret* and *relate* childhood vision—in a poem like this one, for instance.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 34-35:** "Thou Child of Joy, / Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-boy!"
- **Lines 109-129:** "Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie / Thy Soul's immensity; / Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep / Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind, / That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep, / Haunted forever by the eternal mind— / Mighty Prophet! Seer blest! / On whom those truths do rest, / Which we are toiling all our lives to find, / In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave; / Thou, over whom thy Immortality / Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave, / A Presence which is not to be put by; / Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might / Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height, / Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke / The years to bring the inevitable yoke, / Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife? / Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight, / And custom lie upon thee with a weight, / Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!"
- **Lines 169-175:** "Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song! / And let the young Lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound! / We in thought will join your throng, / Ye that pipe and ye that play, / Ye that through your hearts today / Feel the gladness of the May!"
- **Lines 188-192:** "And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Forebode not any severing of our loves! / Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might; / I only have relinquished one delight / To live beneath your more habitual sway."

CONSONANCE

Like assonance, consonance gives the poem both music and meaning. (We've highlighted a small selection of examples here to illustrate how this device works in the poem.)

For instance, take a look at the rich consonance in this important passage from lines 62-65:

> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:

The first couple of lines here are full of short or closed-off /t/, /f/, and /n/ sounds that evoke the limitations they describe: "forgetfulness" and "nakedness." But as the speaker launches into his vision of the descending soul, he starts using longer, softer sounds: the /l/ of "trailing clouds of glory" and the /h/ of "God, who is our home."

Changing sounds thus evoke the "glor[ious]" liberation, benevolence, and beauty of the soul as the speaker imagines it.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "time," "stream"
- **Line 2:** "sight"

- **Line 3:** "To"
- **Line 4:** "celestial," "light"
- **Line 14:** "Waters," "starry," "night"
- **Line 15:** "beautiful"
- **Line 17:** "yet"
- **Line 19:** "birds"
- **Line 20:** "bound"
- **Line 21:** "tabor's"
- **Line 22:** "thought"
- **Line 23:** "timely," "utterance," "thought"
- **Line 25:** "cataracts," "trumpets," "steep"
- **Line 27:** "through," "throng"
- **Line 28:** "fields," "sleep"
- **Line 30:** "Land"
- **Line 31:** "jollity"
- **Line 32:** "heart"
- **Line 33:** "Beast"
- **Line 62:** "Not," "in," "entire," "forgetfulness"
- **Line 63:** "And," "not," "in," "utter," "nakedness"
- **Line 64:** "But," "trailing," "clouds," "glory"
- **Line 65:** "who," "home"
- **Line 203:** "me," "meanest"
- **Line 204:** "deep," "tears"

CAESURA

The Immortality Ode's caesurae help to evoke the speaker's mood and emotions by varying the poem's rhythm. For instance, take a look at the caesurae in line 17:

> But yet I know, || where'er I go,

This brief pause slows down the line, creating a gentle, meditative pace that helps to evoke the speaker's thoughtful mood as he qualifies his statement. The speaker uses caesurae in this way throughout the poem, briefly pausing to flesh out, complicate, or add emphasis to whatever he's just said. All these pauses make it feel to readers as though the speaker he's taking a moment to deeply consider his language.

Later, caesurae evoke the speaker's (sometimes painful) emotions. Take a look at the dash in line 41:

> The fullness of your bliss, I feel || —I feel it all.

The caesura here works in tandem with diacope (the repetition of "feel") as the speaker claims that, no, really, he can "feel" how happy the whole world is in May. That dash does two opposite things at exactly the same time:

- On the one hand, the dash could make the speaker sound firm and insistent. First he says that he "feel[s]" the natural world's "bliss"; then, he repeats that same claim, only more emphatically: "I feel it all." The dash makes it seem as if he's doubling down.
- On the other hand, the dash could make the speaker sound faltering. It's as if he's gotten a little choked up at the words "I feel" and has to collect himself for a moment before he can finish his sentence.

This subtle caesura thus gets at the speaker's complex feelings. Here at the start of the poem, he's genuinely able to appreciate the "sweet May morning"—but he's also in serious pain over his inability to feel it the same way he did when he was little.

By modulating the poem's pace, caesura shapes the poem's tone, helping the reader to *hear* the feeling in the speaker's voice.

(Note that we've only highlighted the caesurae in the first few stanzas here; there are plenty more to find.)

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "meadow, grove, and"
- **Line 2:** "earth, and"
- **Line 17:** "know, where'er"
- **Line 19:** "Now, while"
- **Line 35:** "me, let," "shouts, thou"
- **Line 36:** "creatures, I"
- **Line 37:** "make; I"
- **Line 41:** "bliss, I feel—I"
- **Line 42:** "day! if"
- **Line 48:** "flowers; while"
- **Line 50:** "hear, I hear, with"
- **Line 51:** "Tree, of," " many, one"
- **Line 57:** "now, the"
- **Line 59:** "us, our"
- **Line 65:** "God, who"
- **Line 73:** "travel, still"
- **Line 80:** "And, even"
- **Line 83:** "child, her"
- **Line 88:** "See, where"
- **Line 91:** "See, at," "feet, some"

IMAGERY

The vivid, poignant imagery in the Immortality Ode helps the reader to share the speaker's intense experiences of nature, memory, and the divine.

That imagery appears with a flourish right at the start. Take a look at the very first lines:

> There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparelled in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.

In the speaker's youthful eyes, the landscape once seemed not

merely to shine with heavenly glory, but to be *dressed* in it, as if it were wearing splendid robes of light. Already, there's a sense here that the landscape might also have seemed like a conscious creature to the speaker, a being that could put on lovely clothes. This idea of a conscious, joyful world "apparelled in celestial light" will become a central image in this ode.

The imagery here appeals not just to the eyes, but to the senses of touch and taste. The "freshness" of a dream might equally suggest a delicious spring breeze and the taste of new fruit eaten straight off the tree. Once upon a time, in other words, the speaker's whole body felt immersed in glory; all he had to do was go outside, and he was in heaven.

The speaker struggles with his longing for that youthful experience of "celestial light" all through the poem. But by the end, when he's reconciled himself to the ways in which his vision has changed, his imagery reflects his new understanding. Take a look at how he sees nature in the final stanza:

> I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
> Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;

Again, there's a sense that these "Brooks" (or streams) are alive and conscious: they "trip[] lightly," dancing along like the little child the speaker once was. But here, the speaker's distance from that kind of lively energy doesn't make him feel sad: it only deepens his feelings. He can love the childish energy of the brooks as tenderly as a parent loves a child.

And he can see that even those eternally youthful brooks change: they "fret" their banks, both patterning them with light and wearing away at them.

The imagery here, in other words, helps to trace the speaker's changed understanding of natural beauty. Now nature shows him not just what he's lost, but what he's learned.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparelled in celestial light, / The glory and the freshness of a dream."
- **Lines 10-16:** " The Rainbow comes and goes, / And lovely is the Rose, / The Moon doth with delight / Look round her when the heavens are bare, / Waters on a starry night / Are beautiful and fair; / The sunshine is a glorious birth;"
- **Lines 19-21:** "Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song, / And while the young lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound,"
- **Lines 25-28:** "The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep; / No more shall grief of mine the season wrong; / I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng, / The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,"
- **Lines 43-49:** "While Earth herself is adorning, / This sweet May morning, / And the Children are culling / On every side, / In a thousand valleys far and wide, / Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm, / And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm—"
- **Lines 62-65:** " Not in entire forgetfulness, / And not in utter nakedness, / But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home:"
- **Lines 152-153:** "Are yet the fountain light of all our day, / Are yet a master light of all our seeing;"
- **Lines 169-171:** "Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song! / And let the young Lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound!"
- **Lines 193-196:** "I love the Brooks which down their channels fret, / Even more than when I tripped lightly as they; / The innocent brightness of a newborn Day / Is lovely yet;"
- **Lines 197-199:** "The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;"

PERSONIFICATION

The personification in the Immortality Ode suggests that the speaker feels a living, divine presence in the physical world.

Nature, this speaker suggests, is just one big joyful consciousness, eternally feeling itself. The moon "[l]ook[s] round her" with "delight" at the starry night she illuminates. The sun doesn't just rise, it's "newborn," like a divine baby. And on a gorgeous spring morning, the earth "adorn[s]" herself like a May Queen, dressing up in flowers.

If nature is conscious in this way, it's able not just to *inspire* delight in the people who live in its midst, but also to *share* that delight with them—or communicate with them in other ways. For instance, a particular "Tree" and "Field" can "speak" to the speaker, reminding him of the lost joy he once shared with them in childhood. And the speaker can reply! At the end of the poem, he directly addresses the "Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves" as beloved friends, beings he has a personal relationship with.

All of this personified nature suggests some of the speaker's deepest and most mysterious beliefs. To him, nature is in close relationship with the divine, both "apparelled" in its light and speaking with its voice. Nature, in other words, might offer humanity a way to come into contact with God.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** " The Moon doth with delight / Look round her when the heavens are bare,"
- **Line 16:** " The sunshine is a glorious birth;"
- **Line 25:** "The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;"
- **Lines 30-33:** " Land and sea / Give themselves up to jollity, / And with the heart of May / Doth every Beast keep holiday—"
- **Lines 36-38:** "Ye blessed creatures, I have heard the call / Ye to each other make; I see / The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;"
- **Lines 43-44:** " While Earth herself is adorning, / This sweet May morning,"
- **Lines 51-55:** " —But there's a Tree, of many, one, / A single Field which I have looked upon, / Both of them speak of something that is gone: / The Pansy at my feet / Doth the same tale repeat:"
- **Lines 78-85:** "Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own; / Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind, / And, even with something of a Mother's mind, / And no unworthy aim, / The homely Nurse doth all she can / To make her foster child, her Inmate Man, / Forget the glories he hath known, / And that imperial palace whence he came."
- **Lines 130-133:** " O joy! that in our embers / Is something that doth live, / That Nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive!"
- **Lines 147-148:** "High instincts before which our mortal Nature / Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised;"
- **Lines 188-192:** "And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Forebode not any severing of our loves! / Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might; / I only have relinquished one delight / To live beneath your more habitual sway."
- **Lines 193-196:** "I love the Brooks which down their channels fret, / Even more than when I tripped lightly as they; / The innocent brightness of a newborn Day / Is lovely yet;"

REPETITION

The repetitions that thread through the Immortality Ode help to show how the speaker's thoughts and feelings evolve as he grows—and as he writes.

For instance, variations on the word "glory" reappear no fewer than eight times across the course of the poem; "light," meanwhile, turns up seven times. And that makes sense: the shining, heavenly "glory" that the speaker once saw everywhere around him is the poem's deepest concern. The speaker thinks about and seeks that light all the way through.

But these words can also mean more than one thing. "Light," for instance, can be the light of heaven, or it can be the plain old daylight, seen through the weary eyes of adulthood. Take a look at the way the speaker juxtaposes those two meanings in stanza 5. First, he records how children perceive divine light:

> But he
> Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;

Then, only a few lines later, he observes what happens to that light when people grow up:

> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day.

This repetition suggests that there's a curious relationship between the plain old physical phenomenon of light and the magical light that children see by. If holy light "fade[s] into the light of common day," the two phenomena might be the same thing—just perceived differently!

Something similar happens in stanza 2 when the speaker notes that, even as an adult, he can see that "the sunshine is a glorious birth"—but laments only two lines later that "there hath passed away a glory from the earth." The polyptoton here suggests that seeing something as "glorious"—that is, shining and lovely—is different from really coming into contact with the divine "glory" the speaker has in mind. Not all glory is made the same.

In other words, the speaker uses repetitions to reflect the way people's perceptions change as they get older. At first, he sees this only as a terrible loss. But over the course of the poem, he also comes to claim a new and deeper kind of *adult* seeing—one that uses childhood memory as a foundation for mature wisdom. Writing this poem helps him to grow into himself, to accept change.

And that evolution, too, gets reflected in a repetition. Early in the poem, the speaker looks around at the beautiful spring countryside and feels a little left out, a little melancholy:

> Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
> And while the young lambs bound
> As to the tabor's sound,
> To me alone there came a thought of grief:

Here, he's gloomily focusing on the youthful joy he can no longer fully share. But something has changed by the time these lines return at the end of the poem:

> Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
> And let the young Lambs bound
> As to the tabor's sound!
> We in thought will join your throng,

Now, he's *accepted* his adult distance from that same scene—and in doing so, he's gone from being "me alone" to a

member of a collective "we." In other words, by coming to terms with the way that time has changed him, he's able to fully experience life as an adult, not just as a wistful one-time child. And he's learned that he's not alone: everyone grows up, and everyone has to come to terms with growing up.

The poem's repetitions thus reflect the changing ways people perceive the world as they grow—and the rewards of embracing those changing perceptions.

(And there's yet more repetition to investigate! See the separate entry on Parallelism for more.)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "light"
- **Line 5:** "glory"
- **Line 16:** "glorious"
- **Line 18:** "glory"
- **Lines 19-21:** "Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song, / And while the young lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound,"
- **Line 36:** "Ye"
- **Line 37:** "Ye"
- **Lines 39-40:** " My heart is at your festival, / My head hath its coronal,"
- **Line 57:** "glory"
- **Line 64:** "glory"
- **Line 70:** "light"
- **Line 74:** "splendid"
- **Line 77:** "light"
- **Line 80:** " And"
- **Line 81:** "And"
- **Line 90:** "light"
- **Lines 94-97:** " A wedding or a festival, / A mourning or a funeral; / And this hath now his heart, / And unto this he frames his song;"
- **Line 112:** "blind"
- **Line 122:** "glorious"
- **Line 126:** "blindly"
- **Lines 152-153:** "Are yet the fountain light of all our day, / Are yet a master light of all our seeing;"
- **Lines 169-171:** "Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song! / And let the young Lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound!"
- **Lines 173-174:** " Ye that pipe and ye that play, / Ye that through your hearts today"
- **Line 179:** "splendour," "glory"
- **Lines 182-187:** " In the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be; / In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering; / In the faith that looks through death, / In years that bring the philosophic mind."
- **Lines 201-202:** "Thanks to the human heart by which we live, / Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,"

METAPHOR

A lot of the Immortality Ode's many metaphors hint at a deep, mysterious connection between nature, the human soul, and the divine.

For instance, consider the poem's most important extended metaphor: the idea of the divine as a "celestial light." It's this "light" that the speaker could see all around him in his childhood, and that he misses so poignantly as he grows up and it fades into the plain old literal "light of common day."

- Choosing light as his metaphor for the divine, the speaker suggests that the supernatural and natural are a lot more closely related than one might think.
- After all, light is a perfectly ordinary phenomenon: it's just what *happens*, every morning, like clockwork. It's the ability to see *through* everyday phenomena to the holy—or the ability to see the holy *in* the everyday—that the speaker values and longs for most.

Take a look at the two moments where the speaker imagines sunlight and the dawn as a baby. One appears early in the poem, in line 16:

> The sunshine is a glorious birth;

Here, sunshine is an awe-inspiring, holy "birth"—an image of new life at its most spectacular. But when that metaphor returns at the end of the poem in lines 195-196, something has changed:

> The innocent brightness of a newborn Day
> Is lovely yet;

Here, the "glorious birth" of sunlight has become the "innocent" sweetness of a "newborn Day." The shift in this metaphor reflects the way that the speaker has come to terms with what he's lost as he's grown up. More grounded and wiser at the end of the poem than he was at the beginning, he's able to appreciate the tender, subtle pleasures of everyday life as themselves "glorious" hints of a bigger truth. The "glorious birth" of sunlight and the sweet little "newborn day" are two ways of experiencing the same phenomenon.

And by personifying sunlight as a baby, the speaker also hints that there's a similar union of the "glorious" and the everyday in all human souls.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparelled in celestial light, / The glory and the freshness of a dream."
- **Line 16:** " The sunshine is a glorious birth;"
- **Lines 20-21:** " And while the young lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound,"
- **Lines 39-40:** " My heart is at your festival, / My head hath its coronal,"
- **Lines 58-61:** "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: / The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar:"
- **Line 64:** "clouds of glory"
- **Lines 67-68:** "Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy"
- **Lines 69-71:** "But he / Beholds the light, and whence it flows, / He sees it in his joy;"
- **Lines 72-73:** "The Youth, who daily farther from the east / Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,"
- **Lines 78-85:** "Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own; / Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind, / And, even with something of a Mother's mind, / And no unworthy aim, / The homely Nurse doth all she can / To make her foster child, her Inmate Man, / Forget the glories he hath known, / And that imperial palace whence he came."
- **Lines 103-106:** "The little Actor cons another part; / Filling from time to time his "humorous stage" / With all the Persons, down to palsied Age, / That Life brings with her in her equipage;"
- **Lines 111-112:** "Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep / Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,"
- **Lines 119-120:** "Thou, over whom thy Immortality / Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,"
- **Lines 130-133:** " O joy! that in our embers / Is something that doth live, / That Nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive!"
- **Lines 151-153:** " Which, be they what they may, / Are yet the fountain light of all our day, / Are yet a master light of all our seeing;"
- **Lines 162-168:** " Hence in a season of calm weather / Though inland far we be, / Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither, / Can in a moment travel thither, / And see the Children sport upon the shore, / And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore."
- **Lines 195-196:** "The innocent brightness of a newborn Day / Is lovely yet;"

APORIA

This poem rests on a few piercing moments of aporia. The questions the speaker arrives at in lines 56-57 shape all the thoughts that follow:

> Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
> Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

These questions arrive at the end of the poem's first four stanzas—and while they don't get an immediate, single, or easy answer, they're not exactly rhetorical. Wordsworth composed those first stanzas in 1802, and then spent the next couple of years thinking deeply on what the answers to those questions might be. The rest of the poem is an attempt to figure out exactly where the "visionary gleam" of childhood light disappears to.

One part of his complex thoughts on the matter appears in another moment of aporia. As the speaker addresses a "little Child" who's busy pretending to be a grown-up, he asks:

> Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
> The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
> Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?

In other words, he's asking why on earth this boy is in such a rush to be an adult. You'll grow up soon enough, the speaker warns—much sooner than you can even imagine—and you'll lose all the "blessed[]" instinctive connection with God that, as an innocent child, you currently possess.

These lines gesture at a sad irony of childhood:

- Kids, in the speaker's view, can see the divine in everything—but they can't *understand* that they see this way. It's just the way the world *is*, to them.
- Only by becoming an adult and losing that divine vision, the speaker implies, can people comprehend what they once had.

By phrasing his warning to the child as a question, the speaker gestures at a huge mystery his poem can only tiptoe up to. Why do people lose their innocent childhood connection with the divine? Why, in other words, must they grow up, grow old, and die? There's no simple answer to that question; it has to go unanswered. This, the speaker will eventually conclude, is just the way things are—and people have to learn to accept their losses with grace. His use of aporia suggests that he at last learns to embrace the mystery.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 56-57:** "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"

- **Lines 124-126:** "Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke / The years to bring the inevitable yoke, / Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?"

ALLUSION

Wordsworth makes two prominent allusions in this poem: one to Shakespeare, and one to himself!

In a sense, the whole Immortality Ode alludes to the poem Wordsworth quotes in his epigraph: "My Heart Leaps Up," a simple expression of some of the complex themes this poem examines:

- In this earlier (and much, much shorter) poem, the speaker reflects that he hopes always to respond to the sight of a "Rainbow" with as much joy as he did when he was a child, wishing that his whole life will be "bound" together by loving awe.
- When the speaker opens the second stanza of *this* poem with a shimmering "Rainbow," he's hearkening back to that image—and complicating the picture. An adult might still appreciate nature's beauty, he suggests, but not in exactly the same way as a child does.

The poem's other major allusion also touches on the sorrow of growing up. In lines 103-108, the speaker imagines a six-year-old kid playing, performing all the stages of life like a "little Actor." And there's no way to bring up the idea of life as a play without evoking the "seven ages of man" speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

- That's the speech that begins, famously, "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players."
- It ends with a grim vision of old age as a time when people are robbed of everything that makes life worth living.
- In alluding to this speech, the speaker evokes the sorrow of mortality. But he also raises the idea that life might just be a "play," and that we return to some *realer* reality after that play ends. In other words, this allusion touches the heart of the Immortality Ode's concerns about time, change, death, and eternity.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "The Rainbow comes and goes,"
- **Lines 103-108:** "The little Actor cons another part; / Filling from time to time his "humorous stage" / With all the Persons, down to palsied Age, / That Life brings with her in her equipage; / As if his whole vocation / Were endless imitation."

PARALLELISM

The Immortality Ode often uses parallelism (including the more specific device anaphora) in its most dramatic moments, preparing the reader for a revelation or a new understanding.

One famous example appears in lines 62-63, where the speaker imagines the human soul's arrival on earth:

> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:

Those repeated "not" lines are like an anticipatory drumroll: if the soul doesn't arrive on earth completely forgetful and completely naked, then what does it remember, and what is it dressed in? The revelation of those "clouds of glory" thus feels especially powerful.

Something similar happens at the end of the poem:

> Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
> Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Here, the speaker uses both parallelism and anaphora, starting those drumroll lines with exactly the same words. Here, the sense of anticipation might be even stronger: these are the last four lines of the poem, and readers can feel that the speaker is working up to a grand conclusion. What huge insight is the speaker about to credit to the "human heart" and its feelings?

But then, the speaker undercuts readers' expectations. Where, before, similar parallelism prepared readers for the magnificent arrival of "clouds of glory," here the speaker instead introduces the "meanest flower that blows." This is absolutely humble image of a lowly, common flower, a daisy or a buttercup or a dandelion, something one might normally take no notice of. But it's in just that kind of everyday normalcy that the speaker has learned to find profound meaning.

Parallelism thus creates anticipation, tension, and drama around the poem's deepest insights—whether those insights are trumpeting and glorious, or profound, quiet, and still.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 39-40:** " My heart is at your festival, / My head hath its coronal,"
- **Lines 51-52:** " —But there's a Tree, of many, one, / A single Field which I have looked upon,"

- **Lines 62-63:** " Not in entire forgetfulness, / And not in utter nakedness,"
- **Lines 70-71:** "Beholds the light, and whence it flows, / He sees it in his joy;"
- **Lines 80-81:** " And, even with something of a Mother's mind, / And no unworthy aim,"
- **Lines 94-97:** " A wedding or a festival, / A mourning or a funeral; / And this hath now his heart, / And unto this he frames his song;"
- **Lines 109-112:** "Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie / Thy Soul's immensity; / Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep / Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,"
- **Lines 122-123:** "Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might / Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,"
- **Lines 142-146:** " But for those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things, / Fallings from us, vanishings; / Blank misgivings of a Creature / Moving about in worlds not realised,"
- **Lines 149-150:** " But for those first affections, / Those shadowy recollections,"
- **Lines 173-174:** " Ye that pipe and ye that play, / Ye that through your hearts today"
- **Lines 201-202:** "Thanks to the human heart by which we live, / Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,"

VOCABULARY

Grove (Line 1) - A little cluster of trees.

Apparelled (Line 4) - Dressed or clothed.

Celestial (Line 4) - Heavenly.

Glory (Line 5, Line 18, Line 57, Line 64, Line 179) - This important word can mean "shining light," "magnificence," and "heavenly splendor"—all meaningful ideas in this poem.

Of Yore (Line 6) - Earlier, before.

Whereso'er (Line 7) - A contraction of "wheresoever"—which just means "wherever."

Doth (Line 12, Line 33, Line 55, Line 82, Line 109, Line 131, Line 134) - An old-fashioned word for "does."

Fair (Line 15) - Lovely, beautiful.

Where'er (Line 17) - A contraction of "wherever," pronounced "where-air."

Tabor (Line 21, Line 171) - A small drum, often used in folk dances.

Utterance (Line 23) - Statement or expression. Here, the speaker might mean that he relieved his sadness by writing a poem.

Cataracts (Line 25) - Waterfalls.

Steep (Line 25) - Mountainside.

Wrong (Line 26) - Harm, injure, or insult.

Throng (Line 27) - Fill up in a crowd.

Jollity (Line 31) - Happiness, fun, merriment.

Blessed (Line 36, Line 126) - This word can mean both "holy" and "lucky," and the speaker likely has both of those meanings in mind here.

Jubilee (Line 38) - A gleeful celebration.

Coronal (Line 40) - A crown or halo. Here, the speaker means he feels "crowned" with the joy of the spring.

Adorning (Line 43) - Dressing up, decorating.

Culling (Line 45) - Harvesting, picking.

Visionary (Line 56) - Imaginative or prophetic.

Shades (Line 67) - Shadows.

Whence (Line 70) - From what source.

Attended (Line 75) - Accompanied, followed, looked after.

Yearnings (Line 79) - Longings, desires.

Homely (Line 82) - Down-to-earth, welcoming, and comfortable.

Nurse (Line 82) - Here, a "nurse" isn't a person who takes care of the sick, but a nanny or foster mother.

Inmate (Line 83) - Prisoner.

Imperial (Line 85) - Grand, splendid, magnificent.

Pygmy (Line 87) - Very small.

Fretted (Line 89) - Here, "fretted" could mean both "annoyed" and "covered with." ("Fretting" can be a kind of decorative pattern—imagine the little boy's face covered in kiss-prints.)

Sallies (Line 89) - Sudden flurries.

Frames (Line 97) - Shapes.

Ere (Line 101) - Before. In other words, it won't take long for the little kid the speaker describes to give up his current game and go onto a new one.

Cons (Line 103) - Learns.

Humorous Stage (Line 104) - Here, "humorous" doesn't mean "funny," but "related to the humors"—the four fluids that people used to believe determined a person's health and personality (though no one still believed this in Wordsworth's time—he's alluding to Renaissance-era beliefs here). In other words, the child is taking on many different roles as he plays his games.

Persons (Line 105) - Characters.

Palsied (Line 105) - Shaky or weak.

Equipage (Line 106) - Equipment, gear.

Vocation (Line 107) - Purpose in life.

Semblance (Line 109) - Resemblance, appearance.

Belie (Line 109) - Disguise, conceal, contradict.

Earnest Pains (Line 124) - Sincere efforts.

Yoke (Line 125) - A wooden bar used to hitch an ox or a horse to a plow—here used metaphorically to mean the burdens of daily life.

Earthly Freight (Line 127) - In other words, the child will carry all the heavy burdens of being a grown-up soon enough!

Embers (Line 130) - The glowing coals in a dying fire.

Fugitive (Line 133) - Fleeting, quick to escape.

Perpetual Benediction (Line 135) - Constant blessings and praise.

Creed (Line 137) - A statement of beliefs (especially in religion). In other words, "delight and liberty" are the tenets of childhood.

Obstinate (Line 142) - Stubborn.

Misgivings (Line 145) - Doubts or uncertainties.

Listlessness (Line 158) - A lack of energy; unenthusiasm.

Mad Endeavour (Line 158) - Frantic efforts.

Enmity (Line 160) - Hostility, opposition.

Hither, Thither (Line 165, Line 166) - "Hither" means "here," and "thither" means "there."

Sport (Line 167) - Play.

Primal Sympathy (Line 182) - Inborn understanding—that is, the speaker's original childhood feelings about nature, which he still feels connected to.

Philosophic (Line 187) - "Philosophic" can mean both "wisdom-loving" and "calm in the face of disappointments and sorrows"—both of which are true of this speaker.

Forebode (Line 189) - Warn of. In other words, the speaker begs the beauties of nature not to suggest that he might one day stop loving them.

Relinquished (Line 191) - Given up.

Your More Habitual Sway (Line 192) - Your more constant power. In other words, the only thing the speaker has really given up is seeing divine beauty in nature *all the time*.

Fret (Line 193) - Rub and reshape. In other words, the "Brooks" slowly erode and shape "channels" with their waters.

Tripped (Line 194) - Danced.

Sober (Line 198) - Serious, thoughtful.

The Meanest Flower that Blows (Line 203) - In other words: the commonest, lowliest little flower that blows in the wind.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is, as its title suggests, an ode—an irregularly-shaped poem that honors a particular subject. Other famous odes from the Romantic era sung the praises of nightingales, winds, and autumn. The subject here isn't as tangible as any of those things, though. Instead, this poem celebrates "intimations of immortality," or hints of eternal life—an altogether more mysterious and slippery idea.

A complex subject demands a complex form. This ode is built from eleven stanzas, all with varied rhyme schemes, patterns of meter, and lengths. Each of these stanzas deals with a different angle on Wordsworth's central questions about childhood, memory, and the soul, and each builds on the stanza that came before it.

- For instance, stanza 7 is all about the way that little children play pretend, acting out every stage of adult life.
- Those vivid, concrete observations lead into the more abstract philosophical question the speaker asks in stanza 8: why on earth are children so eager to grow up, when growing up means they'll lose their intense connection with the divine?

The free-form shape here thus helps the poem to feel like a record of developing thoughts—which, in fact, it was! Wordsworth wrote the first four stanzas of this poem—stanzas that end in some big questions—in 1802. The rest of the poem emerged slowly as he thought deeply about what the answers to those questions might be. He didn't complete the remaining seven stanzas until 1804. This poem's thoughtful, evolving shape reflects how seriously Wordsworth took the questions he's asking here—and how profoundly he loved the complex beauties this ode praises.

METER

Like a lot of odes, the Immortality Ode plays with all different kinds of meter, shaping its rhythms to the emotions it describes rather than trying to fit those emotions into a single pattern. The most common foot is the iamb, a foot with an unstressed-stressed, or da-DUM, syllable pattern, but line length varies wildly; some lines have just two stresses, and others five!

Moving from long lines to short lines, iambs to trochees, trimeter to hexameter, this poem refuses to be pinned down. The wide variation in the poem's rhythms helps readers to feel and think right alongside the speaker.

For instance, consider the way that shorter and longer lines work together in the second stanza, in which the speaker

describes how—even though he can still appreciate nature's beauty—he knows that he can no longer see the special shine on things he remembers from his childhood.

The speaker starts this stanza with short lines of iambic trimeter—that is, lines of three iambs, like this:

> The Rain- | bow comes | and goes,
> And love- | ly is | the Rose,
> The Moon | doth with | delight

But then, he breaks in with a longer line of iambic tetrameter (*four* iambs):

> Look round | her when | the heavens | are bare,

(Note that the word "heavens" would be compressed into a single syllable in Wordsworth's accent: "heav'ns.")

The changing shape of these lines mirror the speaker's experience. First, in short, self-contained lines, he contemplates one beautiful thing at a time: a shimmering rainbow, a single "Rose." Then, in a longer passage, he looks delightedly around at a whole night sky—just like the personified "Moon" he describes.

At the end of this stanza, when he turns from these beautiful sights to sad thoughts, his lines stretch out even more:

> But yet | I know, | where'er | I go,
> That there | hath passed | away | a glor- | y from | the earth.

That long line of iambic hexameter (six iambs) at the end of the stanza is markedly different from all the shorter descriptions around it. This movement from short impressions to this longer conclusion evokes exactly what the speaker is describing. While he's still capable of seeing the beauty in nature, his experiences of that beauty feel pretty brief and simple. It's his sense of lost "glory" that really takes up space in his mind and heart.

Meter reflects meaning in this way all through the poem, helping the reader to sense the speaker's emotions through his pace and his rhythms.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of the Immortality Ode shapeshifts across the poem. Rather than sticking to a single pattern of rhyme, Wordsworth uses different rhyme schemes in every stanza, shaping his sounds to fit the ideas and feelings he explores.

For instance, look at the way his rhymes work in the first stanza. The scheme runs like this:

ABABACDDC

Now, take a look at how those rhymes line up with what the speaker's talking about:

- In the sing-song, back-and-forth ABABA section, he's describing how the world looked to him in childhood, when all of nature seemed to shine with "celestial light."
- But when the new C rhyme enters, so does a new idea: that the speaker can't see things this way any more, now that he's grown up.
- And as he describes looking desperately around for that lost beauty, the CDDC rhymes evoke what he's doing. Like his searching eyes, his rhymes swing from side to side, and end up right back where they started: no matter where he looks, he can't rediscover the beauty he used to see.

This kind of sensitive, meaningful rhyme appears across the whole poem, right up to the end. Take a look at what happens in the poem's last eight lines, when the speaker discusses the consolations he finds in his adult way of seeing, the beauty he understands differently now that he has a grown-up perspective on the world. There, the rhymes run like this:

ABBACDCD

This pattern of rhyme mirrors the first stanza, repeating a similar scheme in *reverse*. That mirroring suggests that, while the speaker has lost his childhood vision, he's also found a *new* way to feel the world's beauty—one that's still lovely, balanced, and harmonious, just different.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker of this poem seems likely to be Wordsworth himself. "Intimations of Immortality" deals with themes that Wordsworth thought and wrote about all his life: memory, childhood, holiness, and natural beauty. This poem's epigraph is even a quotation from one of Wordsworth's earlier poems on similar ideas.

No matter whether one reads the speaker as Wordsworth, he's certainly Wordsworthian: a poetic soul who feels as deeply as he thinks. A grown and thoughtful adult, he's still wistful for the blazing, glorious way he saw the world in childhood, when everything seemed "apparelled in celestial light." But he's also able to use his mature "philosophic mind" to reflect on how his childhood visions inform his adult belief in the soul's immortality.

Both his childhood memories and his adult reflections are built on his intense feelings about natural beauty. This speaker is deeply in love with the glory of nature, seeing it not just as a source of comfort but a reflection of heaven itself. In this impassioned and sincere speaker's eyes, the whole world can be read as a prelude to a luminous eternity.

SETTING

This poem is set in a brilliant spring in the English countryside: a "sweet May morning" when the whole world seems full of fresh life. The joy the speaker sees in the leaping lambs, singing birds, and laughing children reminds him of his own childhood, when the world looked even more intensely beautiful to him than it does now.

The natural world isn't just a pretty backdrop for the speaker's thoughts, but the origin of this whole poem. Seeing nature as a mirror of heaven itself, the speaker draws strength and consolation from the beauty, freshness, and new life of the spring. Even if the world doesn't look as wondrous to him now as it did when he was a child, his memories of seeing a divine light in nature can still remind him of his deep-down faith that the human soul both comes from and returns to a beautiful eternity with "God, who is our home."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) drafted the Immortality Ode over many years. He wrote the first four stanzas in 1802, slowly added to them, and published a first version of the complete poem in his 1807 collection *Poems, in Two Volumes*. He'd go on to revise and reprint this poem many times. Many scholars see this poem as Wordsworth's masterpiece and final word, the highest expression of his philosophy.

This poem isn't just an exploration of everything dear to Wordsworth, but also a core sample straight from the heart of English Romanticism. The ideas this poem deals with—the human soul, the transcendent beauty of nature, the importance of deep feeling—are hallmarks of the Romantic period. In this early-19th-century movement, artists and thinkers reacted against Enlightenment ideals of clarity, elegance, and reason, embracing mystery, emotion, and earthy poetic forms like the ballad instead.

But not every poet readers now think of as a Romantic dealt with these ideas in the same way. For instance, when Wordsworth shared the first few verses of this poem with his friend and collaborator Coleridge, Coleridge found enough to disagree with in its philosophy that he wrote a whole poem in reply: "Dejection: an Ode," which argues that the ability to appreciate the beauty of the world is a more complex emotional knot to untie than Wordsworth's poem allows for.

Much-discussed and much-quoted, the Immortality Ode is still widely regarded as one of the most powerful and important poems in English literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While Wordsworth was slowly becoming a devout Christian during the years when he was working on this poem, the religious beliefs that he describes here—that nature is holy and the soul is eternal—go a little outside the standard Christian framework. Instead, they have a lot to do with a nondenominational spiritual belief that became popular in the early 19th century: pantheism.

Pantheism is the belief that God is in everything, and everything is in God. To a pantheist, nature isn't just beautiful because God made it, or because it reflects the divine, but because it's an actual *manifestation* of God. This school of thought was never so much a full-blown religious movement as a philosophy, but it was one that many poets and thinkers of the Romantic era felt deeply.

Many 19th-century Western thinkers in particular saw pantheism as an antidote to institutionalized Christian dogma, which they felt had become oppressive and legalistic; see William Blake for just one fiery critique of Christian authoritarianism. Pantheism allowed for deep spiritual feelings without Christian cultural baggage.

Pantheism and Romanticism both responded to sweeping 19th-century cultural changes like the Industrial Revolution. As the economic landscape of Europe became more and more mechanized and populations began to shift from the countryside to the city, many thinkers feared that people had begun to see nature as a mere resource, a wilderness to be mastered and stripped of its wealth. Reading nature as one of the faces of God, pantheism resisted a purely mechanical, rational, and exploitative worldview.

The philosophy that Wordsworth espouses in this poem splits the difference between a more traditional Christian idea of God as a transcendent creator and a pantheistic idea of God-in-everything. To this poem's speaker, God can *appear* to be in everything—but only to children, whose souls have been hanging out with God in heaven more recently than adults' have.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor Toby Jones give a powerful reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/P3OqKwqUb4U)
- The Poem in Wordsworth's Hand — See a draft of the poem in Wordsworth's own handwriting, and learn more about how he wrote it. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-intimations-of-immortality-by-william-wordsworth)
- My Heart Leaps Up — Read an analysis of the poem that

Wordsworth quotes as his epigraph here—his earlier (and much shorter and simpler) exploration of the same themes. Compare and contrast! (https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-wordsworth/my-heart-leaps-up)

- A Brief Biography — Read a short biography of Wordsworth, and find links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- A Lecture on Wordsworth — Listen to Professor Jonathan Bate, an important scholar of Romanticism, explaining why Wordsworth's poetry was so revolutionary. (https://youtu.be/0wgVApASNxw)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Complaint
- A Slumber did my Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

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