

“Tintern Abbey”

William Wordsworth



About the Poet

William Wordsworth was born in 1770 in Cumberland. An orphan whom the unroofed school of Nature attracted more than the discipline of the classics was one of the pioneers of the Romantic Revival. He is also known as a lake district poet and belongs to the first generation of romantic poets. He was brought up and educated in the beautiful lake region. The second period of his life begins with his university education at Cambridge in 1787. He wrote many poems including *The Prelude*, *The Excursion* and *The Recluse*. The best of his works appeared in the *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1798. He was made poet laureate after poet Robert Southey's death. In the last half century of his life William Wordsworth retired to his beloved lake district, where he was born. He lived so close to nature that her influence is reflected in all his poetry. William Wordsworth worshipped Nature and believed that "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her". Wordsworth saw a reflection of the living God in every natural object. Nature for him is transfused and illuminated by Spirit. Man is also a reflection of the divine Spirit. The spiritual appeal of nature is expressed in every line of his poem "Tintern Abbey".



About the poem

Tintern is a village located in Monmouthshire. Tintern Abbey is an old ruin. It was an abbey or monastery that was abandoned in 1536 when King Henry VIII dissolved monasteries in England. The place is located in the valley of river Wye and is known for its picturesque natural beauty. William Wordsworth had visited Tintern Abbey in 1793 and it was a lonely journey. He revisited the place in 1798. His beloved sister Dorothy was with him during his second visit.

The poem's full title, as given in *Lyrical Ballads*, is "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798". The poem is written in *blank verse* (unrhymed iambic pentameter lines) using *verse paragraphs*. This structure gives it a conversational and prosaic style. The main purpose of William Wordsworth as a poet was to free poetry from elevated poetic diction of neo-classical poetry. The poem can be conveniently divided into three parts. In the first part he describes the scene at Tintern Abbey; in the second he reflects on his own boyhood days of thoughtless passion and in the third stage his love for nature becomes spiritual, and he addresses his sister and companion Dorothy.



Notes

William Wordsworth begins the poem with a declaration that he is visiting this place again after five years: with five summers and five long winters. Tintern Abbey remains unchanged even after five years. He is able to hear the soft inland murmur of the river water. The 'steep and lofty cliffs' are also the same and they impart the deep seclusion to the place. They also connect the landscape with the quiet of the sky. The speaker in this poem is able to recognise the sycamore tree with its dense shade and rests under it again. The place remains much the same but his life has undergone a change. Unfortunately it has taken a sharp turn during these five years. As a result he has matured. Thus the poet finds a sharp contrast between the unchanged nature and his own changed outlook.

Wordsworth did not forget this place even during his long absence from the scene. He felt very lonely during his stay in towns and cities but the beautiful forms of nature had left such an impression upon his mind that their remembrance filled his whole being – his body, heart and higher mind – with 'tranquil restoration'. The memory of the beautiful forms helped him in his lonely journey. Apart from tranquillity nature has gifted him the more sublime aspect : the blessed or the cheerful mood in which the weary weight/burden of life or of the unintelligible world is lightened.



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There is a shift in tone in the poem after this. It can be regarded as the second phase in which he reflects upon his boyhood days when the natural world for him was of unmixed passion. His love for nature was sensuous but it is this blessed mood that guides us and leads us forward gently. He feels that a new bond has been formed with nature. It is the spiritual bond when he feels numbness in body – the very blood circulation and breathing seems to be suspended. It seems to him that his body has fallen asleep and his soul is awakened. As a result he has become a living soul. He has established communion with God through nature. He personifies the river Wye and addresses it using an apostrophe “O Sylvan Wye”. He calls it Sylvan which means ‘connected with forests and trees’ because it flows through the wood. He feels he is changed from what he was before. The boyhood days of thoughtless passion are over but the loss has been compensated by maturity and age. He does not lament the loss as Nature has gifted him with sublime thoughts. As a result he hears sad music of humanity. He has learnt to look on nature in a mature and emotionally subdued way. He feels that something is far deeply interfused in nature. He feels the presence of living God or divine spirit in nature. It runs through all the living beings. He sees that everything in nature is inter-connected through this divine spirit. Wordsworth has formed intellectual, philosophical and spiritual bond with nature. This, however, does not mean that he is not attracted towards the sights, sounds, smell of nature. He still loves the natural objects – mountains, trees, rivers etc. – for their sensuous appeal. And they anchor his sublime thoughts and guard his heart and soul. Such is the impact of Nature on human mind that it renders the mind impervious to “evil tongues” and “sneers of selfish men”. Nature instils a cheerful faith in the poet that the world is full of blessings (William Wordsworth was disappointed and disillusioned because of failure of the French Revolution. He returns to nature to find solace).

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William Wordsworth addresses his sister Dorothy in the last verse paragraph. He calls her his dear friend. He sees a reflection of his own past in her eyes and his own thoughtless self in her self. Dorothy is at the passionate and immature stage where he was in his boyhood days. He says that he would have been happy even without this enlightenment because his sister is with him. Her presence has made this moment very precious. He prays for his sister and requests the moon to shine upon his sister. He says that in later years when he is dead and buried he will no longer be able to hear her voice and catch the reflection of his past in the expression of her eyes. She would be lonely and in pensive mood but nature would come to her rescue. The memory of this experience will help to heal her. After his death she would remember him as a worshipper of nature. It means Dorothy would go through the same phase of development and transformation that Wordsworth had gone through.

Thanks

Vipanjeet Kaur, PGGCG-11

