

# The Prelude

By William Wordsworth

**William Wordsworth** (1770-1850) is one of the most famous poets in the history of English Literature. He was born in Cockermouth in Cumbria, part of the region commonly known as the Lake District, and his birthplace had a huge influence on his writing. So did the fact that his mother died when he was only eight years old. His father wasn't always around, although William did use his library for reading. William spent time with his grandparents who lived in nearby Penrith, an even wilder and more rugged place.

*The Prelude* is one of the greatest works of literature ever written in English. It is a long autobiographical poem in 14 sections. The first version was written in 1798 but he continued to work on it throughout his lifetime. His wife Mary published it three months after his death in 1850.

The poem shows the **spiritual growth of the poet**, how he comes to terms with who he is, and his place in nature and the world. Wordsworth was inspired by memories of events and visits to different places, explaining how they affected him. He described *The Prelude* as "a poem on the growth of my own mind" with "contrasting views of Man, Nature, and Society".

Adjective "little" shows delicacy of man made object  
Adjective "rocky" contrasts with this demonstrating nature's power over man.

Personification of the nature. Creates the impression the speaker has a personal relationship with it. It is able to gently lead him.

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

Personification of the boat, again creating impression of the close relationship the speaker has.

Cautious-doesn't want to be caught, links to theme of loneliness

Oxymoron-pleasure is something to be enjoyed, trouble implies he cannot do it fully, maybe for fear of being caught?

## personification

Soft verbs create an image of the calmness and beauty surrounding him

Leaving behind her still, on either side,  
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,  
Until they melted all into one track  
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,  
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point  
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view  
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,

Simile demonstrates pride he has at his determination to navigate out in the wilderness

Adjective craggy again demonstrates dominance of nature, it's rough and uneven, difficult to climb, etc.

Personification to describe the boat, again highlighting the personal relationship.  
Elfin meaning small and delicate, pinnacle meaning boat.

Demonstrates the beauty the speaker sees in the nature that surrounds him.

The horizon's utmost boundary; far above  
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.  
She was an elfin pinnacle; lustily  
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,  
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat  
Went heaving through the water like a swan;  
When, from behind that craggy steep till then

Adverb demonstrates how he is able to control the boat

Demonstrates his peaceful surroundings.

Simile describes how the boat moves through the water, comparison to swan again linking with nature. He feels at one with nature.

Repetition of the adjective "huge" demonstrates the dominance of the mountain peak.

Personification of mountain, again creates a very powerful image.

Noun "stature" and verb "towered" again demonstrate how powerful nature is, physically now in terms of size

The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,  
As if with voluntary power instinct,  
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,  
And growing still in stature the grim shape  
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,  
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own  
And measured motion like a living thing,  
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,

Simile again showing power nature has, and how quickly it can change and turn against man kind.

Verb "struck" now begins to change the atmosphere from calm to stormy. Repetition demonstrates how he is beginning to try to go against nature.

Personification shows how he feels nature has its own agenda and makes its own decisions

Verb shows how he is no longer at one with nature and has become intimidated by it now he feels it has turned against him.

"covert" as a noun is a thicket or bush in which animals can hide, so it could demonstrate how he is trying to hide from nature. Used as an adjective it means he is being secretive, again because he is trying to hide and get away.

Adjective contrasts with the stormy mood and atmosphere the writer has created.

He has had to fight against nature to get back to safety.

And through the silent water stole my way  
Back to the covert of the willow tree;  
There in her mooring-place I left my bark, -  
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave  
And serious mood; but after I had seen  
That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense  
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts

Adjectives demonstrate the shift in mood

Even afterwards he continues to feel insignificant and cannot function as he normally would.

After his experience he cannot forget what happened and the lesson he cannot control nature.  
Noun "darkness" creates a sinister atmosphere, pointing to the unpredictability of nature.

Nouns "solitude" and "desertion" now demonstrate how alone he feels, in contrast to the start of the poem when he was familiar with nature.

Adjectives again demonstrate power and dominance of nature over mankind.

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

Adjectives now demonstrate the disconnect he feels between him and nature.

Simile demonstrates the huge contrast in power between man and nature

Adverb creates the image that the experience is haunting him, which is further supported by the final line.  
Whether awake or asleep he cannot escape the unknown and unpredictable power of nature.

# Structure

There are no stanzas: the writing is continuous though there is plenty of punctuation to help us read it. **This extract is a complete story in itself.** It starts with "One summer evening..." and finishes with the effects on his mind of the boat trip: "a trouble to my dreams".

# Themes

- **Nature:** humanity is part of nature and sometimes we can be made to feel very small and insignificant by the natural world.
- **Loneliness:** Wordsworth is often on his own throughout *The Prelude* and this is important to him. He can think more clearly and is more affected by events and places as a result.
- **The night:** the poem seems to suggest that you can sometimes experience feelings and events more clearly at night, perhaps due to loneliness.

# Key Question

How does the poet use language to present the effects of nature?