

**Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Book Eleventh through Book Thirteenth:
The Healing of the Heart's I (Eye) That Sees**

Mother! whose virgin bosom was uncrossed
 With the least shade of thought to sin allied;
 Woman! above all women glorified,
 Our tainted nature's solitary boast;
 Purer than foam on central ocean tost;
 Brighter than eastern skies at daybreak strewn
 With fancied roses, than the unblemished moon
 Before her wane begins on heaven's blue coast;
 Thy Image falls to earth. Yet some, I ween,
 Not unforgiven the suppliant knee might bend,
 As to a visible Power, in which did blend
 All that was mixed and reconciled in Thee
 Of mother's love with maiden purity,
 Of high with low, celestial with terrene!
 --"The Virgin," *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*

It is not insignificant that Wordsworth traces his imagination's restoration and his general personhood's renewal through a series of memories. It is a restoration of "the eye that sees," that is the poetic imagination, but also the person, the noble person in Wordsworth's view, that chooses the rural and the common over the urban and the chaotic, the simple and the unassuming over the critical and educated, the optimistic and living over the despairing and cruel. Of course, this raises numerous questions about Wordsworth's anthropology, his psychology, and his soteriology. His utopian closing also raises any number of issues about his views of politics and of the future.

Exploratory Questions

- What is it like to despair, to lose hope?
- What are the best ways to describe one's negative actions? (sin, repression, criminality, etc.)
- Is it possible to resist the negative inclinations of one's personality?
- Are there key moments in our lives that define us and change our life's course?
- Are local face-to-face relationships better than more short-term ones?

Book Eleventh [*Imagination, How Impaired and Restored*]

11.1-41—The contrast between Nature's harmony and his own distracted and depressed state.

11.42-95—The war within himself; his loss of trust within himself of both the poets and the historians.

11.96-135—What remained in him from his childhood smothered by his aesthetic critical judgmentalism.

11.136-194—The pull of the cult of the picturesque and of aesthetic sensuousness as a replacement for greater ends of liberty and life.

11.195-256—How Mary Hutchinson modeled for him a better way—one of humble receptivity and natural feeling; her blessedness that God exalts in. He had had this same spirit before judgmentalism settled into his soul. Wordsworth shakes off this false habit of judging and being.

11.257-277a—A bridge passage that stresses the “spots of time” when the mind is repaired to be “lord and master” of its will to act.

11.277b-344—His first example of such a kairotic moment—age 5, lost from his guide (the family servant James), he encounters the old gibbet for a former murder and has an arresting vision of a girl walking with a pitcher upon her head (a ghost?). 11.324-326 offers the moral of the first anecdote. This is followed by another brief contemplation of the mystery and greatness of the human person.

11.345-395—His second example, this one at Christmas when he was 13, after the death of his father. He goes out into the wintery weather and believes that God is using the scene to bring him to correction of his desires. He looks back upon this moment many times later as a source of renewal.

Discussion Questions for Book Eleventh

1. Given his belief in human natural goodness, how does Wordsworth’s narration falter over the notion of human wickedness?
2. Does Wordsworth idealize Mary Hutchinson, his future wife, too much? Why and/or why not?
3. Why does he use the two anecdotes he uses to make his point about points of fundamental change or restoration?

Book Twelfth [Same Subject (Continued)]

12.1-14—Wordsworth sets out in a rather dense passage the idea that Nature manifests in both emotions of excitement and moods of calm and peace, the former energetic, the later still, and that both of these are necessary and mutually interchange.

12.15-52—Wordsworth begins to return to this healthy mixture, setting aside his desperation and despair, and begins to recover his high view of human nature.

12.53-144—The change back includes a wiser Wordsworth able to anticipate the follies of human beings, especially those who espouse philosophies such as Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* that do not take consideration for the local and personal experience of people lived in real face-to-face circumstances.

12.145-204—The local, rural existence is superior to the urban life of chaos. The “public road” in a rural setting is one that is slower and more at ease. Love does not easily grow among oppression and hurried, excessive, anonymous city life.

12.205-219—He extends his distinction to that between the uncultured, unassuming world and the world of over-educated books and discriminations.

12.220-312a—A longer passage that prizes the mountain chapel above the wealthy urban temple. In this passage he willingly invokes prophetic and oracular language to describe the contemplative subject the rural world offers, one for which he is grateful to God. It is a world that recognizes the beauty of inner dignity and the beauty of outward humble bodies.

12.312b-354—An extended example of his crossing Salisbury Plain and beholding a vision of the former barbaric, superstitious human sacrifices of the ancient Britons. In other visions he beholds the Druids with their cosmic astronomical rituals.

12.355-379—The concluding passage for book twelve summarizes the last two books with a semi-prophetic claim that the young poet could now behold the interchange of calm and energy with “eye that sees.”

Discussion Questions for Book Twelfth

1. Would you agree with Wordsworth that a slower, more face-to-face world is more capable of love and peace?
2. Is Wordsworth being fair to the world of books and urban culture? Why and/or why not?
3. Why does he believe that he has matured and come to see as a poet should?

Book Thirteenth [Conclusion]

13.1-65—Jones and Wordsworth’s ascent up Mt. Snowdon, age 21, will form the basis for much of book thirteen. Note the notions of struggle, the fog, the surrounding darkness, the breaking through of the moon, the sight and sound of the sea.

13.66-165—Wordsworth sees in this defining moment in time an image of the mind which is subject to the greater mind of God as expressed through Nature and yet is itself a powerful creative force. The mind is a kind of *imago dei* in its powers and impressions, in its “sovereignty within and peace at will.” Wordsworth insists that he was always faithful to the high ends of truth and beauty and did not give way to low desires or base goals—which seems surprising after his admissions of despair in earlier books. [Compare these lines with the more Christian reworking in 1850: 14.90-100, 123-129, 177-185.]

13.166-210—A recapitulation of what *The Prelude* has traced in terms of his poet’s development.

13.211-246a—Praise for Dorothy’s maternal tender attitude and its impact upon him as balanced off by the experiences of divine terror in Nature.

13.246b-287—Similar praise for Coleridge’s influence upon Wordsworth, especially in matters for philosophical. Note some of the disagreements between them (13.281-287.)

13.288-331—The main issue at hand has been imagination as a creative power for the poet, and Wordsworth’s own experiences at school and abroad have been part of that preparation.

13.332-366—One final episode of memory—his time with Raisley Calvert upon the Isle of Wight.

13.367-427—The circular return to *The Prelude*’s opening mood of expressive joy and poetic exaltation. Wordsworth compares this to Coleridge’s own poetry, and insists that whatever his faults, that the project of a poet’s mind is justified. Just as Coleridge has helped rejuvenate Wordsworth, so he hopes for Coleridge’s own recovery.

13.428-452—The last stanza of the poem is deeply prophetic (in the quasi-Romantic sense), contrasting those that would slip back to ancient corrupt ways [i.e. Napoleonic France] versus the promise of a still hopeful (even utopian) future for humanity—“all revolutions in the hopes/ And fears of man.”

Discussion Questions for Book Thirteenth

1. Does Wordsworth have too high a view of his own past actions and beliefs?
2. How important is the maternal attitude of his sister Dorothy to William’s development?
3. Likewise, how important is Coleridge?
4. What do you make of the last stanza? Why end in the way he does?