

Wordsworth as a Poet

William Wordsworth was one of the founders of English Romanticism and one of its most central figures and important intellects. He is remembered as a poet of spiritual and epistemological speculation, a poet concerned with the human relationship to nature and a fierce advocate of using the vocabulary and speech patterns of common people in poetry. The son of John and Ann Cookson Wordsworth, William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumberland, located in the Lake District of England: an area that would become closely associated with Wordsworth for over two centuries after his death. He began writing poetry as a young boy in grammar school, and before graduating from college he went on a walking tour of Europe, which deepened his love for nature and his sympathy for the common man: both major themes in his poetry. Wordsworth is best known for Lyrical Ballads, co-written with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and The Prelude, a Romantic epic poem chronicling the “growth of a poet’s mind.”

Wordsworth’s deep love for the “beauteous forms” of the natural world was established early. The Wordsworth children seem to have lived in a sort of rural paradise along the Derwent River, which ran past the terraced garden below the ample house whose tenancy John Wordsworth had obtained from his employer, the political magnate and property owner Sir James Lowther, Baronet of Lowther (later Earl of Lonsdale).

William attended the grammar school near Cockermouth Church and Ann Birkett’s school at Penrith, the home of his maternal grandparents. The intense lifelong friendship between William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy probably began when they, along with Mary Hutchinson, attended school at Penrith. Wordsworth’s early childhood beside the Derwent and his schooling at Cockermouth are vividly recalled in various passages of The Prelude and in shorter poems such as the sonnet “Address from the Spirit of Cockermouth Castle.” His experiences in and around Hawkshead, where William and Richard Wordsworth began attending school in 1779, would also provide the poet with a store of images and sensory experience that he would continue to draw on throughout his poetic career, but especially during the “great decade” of 1798 to 1808. This childhood idyll was not to continue, however. In March of 1778 Ann Wordsworth died while visiting a friend in London. In June 1778 Dorothy was sent to live in Halifax, Yorkshire, with her mother’s cousin Elizabeth Threlkeld, and she lived with a succession of relatives thereafter. She did not see William again until 1787.

In December of 1783 John Wordsworth, returning home from a business trip, lost his way and was forced to spend a cold night in the open. Very ill when he reached home, he died December 30. Though separated from their sister, all the boys eventually attended school together at Hawkshead, staying in the house of Ann Tyson. In 1787, despite poor finances caused by ongoing litigation over Lord Lowther’s debt to John Wordsworth’s estate, Wordsworth went up to Cambridge as a sizar in St. John’s College. As he himself later noted, Wordsworth’s undergraduate career was not distinguished by particular brilliance.

In the third book of The Prelude Wordsworth recorded his reactions to life at Cambridge and his changing attitude toward his studies. During his last summer as an undergraduate, he and his college friend Robert Jones—much influenced by William Coxe’s Sketches of the Natural, Civil,

and Political State of Swisserland (1779)—decided to make a tour of the Alps, departing from Dover on July 13, 1790.

Though Wordsworth, encouraged by his headmaster William Taylor, had been composing verse since his days at Hawkshead Grammar School, his poetic career begins with this first trip to France and Switzerland. During this period he also formed his early political opinions—especially his hatred of tyranny. These opinions would be profoundly transformed over the coming years but never completely abandoned. Wordsworth was intoxicated by the combination of revolutionary fervor he found in France—he and Jones arrived on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille—and by the impressive natural beauty of the countryside and mountains. Returning to England in October, Wordsworth was awarded a pass degree from Cambridge in January 1791, spent several months in London, and then traveled to Jones's parents' home in North Wales. During 1791 Wordsworth's interest in both poetry and politics gained in sophistication, as natural sensitivity strengthened his perceptions of the natural and social scenes he encountered.

Wordsworth's passion for democracy, as is clear in his "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" (also called "Apology for the French Revolution"), is the result of his two youthful trips to France. In November 1791 Wordsworth returned to France, where he attended sessions of the National Assembly and the Jacobin Club. In December he met and fell in love with Annette Vallon, and at the beginning of 1792 he became the close friend of an intellectual and philosophical army officer, Michel Beaupuy, with whom he discussed politics. Wordsworth had been an instinctive democrat since childhood, and his experiences in revolutionary France strengthened and developed his convictions. His sympathy for ordinary people would remain with Wordsworth even after his revolutionary fervor had been replaced with the "softened feudalism" he endorsed in his Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmoreland in 1818.