

Discussion Questions for Week Three: The Wordsworths

Although his work may seem archaic to you, Wordsworth's poetry was quite experimental during his time (as he states in the Advertisement). Wordsworth's emphasis on "the real language of men" and on "low and rustic life" defied the English tradition of poetry, which had historically used intellectual, philosophical, and witty language aimed at an intellectual, upper-class audience (think of the Pope poem we read on the first day of class).

- (1) What do you think of Wordsworth's new style of poetry? Does he use common, everyday language? or is he, as his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge argued, idealizing his poetry?
- (2) Why is the adult speaker so concerned with the little girl understanding death in "We Are Seven"? Are we meant with the speaker or the child?
- (3) What role does the concept of "nature" play in Wordsworth's poems?
- (4) How does Wordsworth's poetics of democracy relate to Blake's poetry?
- (5) In "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," literary scholar M. H. Abrams analyzes a special kind of lyric poem that follows a specific pattern. Abrams calls this kind of poem the Greater Romantic Lyric. "Tintern Abbey" is a GRL. Abrams writes that these poems

present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.

Identify the parts of the GRL as outlined by Abrams in "Tintern Abbey":

- What is the poet describing at the beginning of the poem?
- When does the poet switch from vernacular to more formal speech?
- What is the tragic loss, moral decision, or emotional problem?
- What is/are the poet's major insight/s?
- How and where does the poem end?

(6) Dorothy writes about many of the same places and experiences in her journal as does William in his poetry. In fact, William would often look back to Dorothy's journal entries as reminders and inspiration for his poetry. I want you to consider some of Dorothy's journal entries alongside the corresponding poems of William. What kinds of connections/contrasts do you see? On what details does each author focus? What is left out, what is emphasized, what remains the same, and why does this matter?

- * Dorothy's entry for 15 April 1802 and William's "I wandered lonely as a Cloud"
- * Dorothy's entry for 31 July 1802 and William's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge"
- * Dorothy's entry for 1 August 1802 and William's "It is a beautiful evening, calm and free"