

SUMMARY "TINTERN ABBEY"

Summary

@ The full title of this poem is "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798." It opens with the speaker's declaration that five years have passed since he last visited this location, encountered its tranquil, rustic scenery, and heard the murmuring waters of the river. He recites the objects he sees again, and describes their effect upon him: the "steep and lofty cliffs" impress upon him "thoughts of more deep seclusion"; he leans against the dark sycamore tree and looks at the cottage-grounds and the orchard trees, whose fruit is still unripe. He sees the "wreaths of smoke" rising up from cottage chimneys between the trees, and imagines that they might rise from "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods," or from the cave of a hermit in the deep forest.

The speaker then describes how his memory of these "beauteous forms" has worked upon him in his absence from them: when he was alone, or in crowded towns and cities, they provided him with "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart." The memory of the woods and cottages offered "tranquil restoration" to his mind, and even affected him when he was not aware of the memory, influencing his deeds of kindness and love. He further credits the memory of the scene with offering him access to that mental and spiritual state in which the burden of the world is lightened, in which he becomes a "living soul" with a view into "the life of things." The speaker then says that his belief that the memory of the woods has affected him so strongly may be "vain"—but if it is, he has still turned to the memory often in times of "fretful stir."

Even in the present moment, the memory of his past experiences in these surroundings floats over his present view of them, and he feels bittersweet joy in reviving them. He thinks happily, too, that his present experience will provide many happy memories for future years. The speaker acknowledges that he is different now from how he was in those long-ago times, when, as a boy, he "bounded o'er the mountains" and through the streams. In those days, he says, nature made up his whole world: waterfalls, mountains, and woods gave shape to his passions, his appetites, and his love. That time is now past, he says, but he does not mourn it, for though he cannot resume his old relationship with nature, he has been amply compensated by a new set of more mature gifts; for instance, he can now "look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity." And he can now sense the presence of something far more subtle, powerful, and fundamental in the light of the setting suns, the ocean, the air itself, and even in the mind of man; this energy seems to him "a motion and a spirit that impels / All thinking thoughts... / And rolls through all things." For that reason, he says, he still loves nature, still loves mountains and pastures and woods, for they anchor his purest thoughts and guard the heart and soul of his "moral being."

The speaker says that even if he did not feel this way or understand these things, he would still be in good spirits on this day, for he is in the company of his "dear, dear (d) Sister," who is also his "dear, dear Friend," and in whose voice and manner he observes his former self, and beholds "what I was once." He offers a prayer to nature that he might continue to do so

for a little while, knowing, as he says, that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her,” but leads rather “from joy to joy.” Nature’s power over the mind that seeks her out is such that it renders that mind impervious to “evil tongues,” “rash judgments,” and “the sneers of selfish men,” instilling instead a “cheerful faith” that the world is full of blessings. The speaker then encourages the moon to shine upon his sister, and the wind to blow against her, and he says to her that in later years, when she is sad or fearful, the memory of this experience will help to heal her. And if he himself is dead, she can remember the love with which he worshipped nature. In that case, too, she will remember what the woods meant to the speaker, the way in which, after so many years of absence, they became more dear to him—both for themselves and for the fact that she is in them.

Form

“Tintern Abbey” is composed in blank verse, which is a name used to describe unrhymed lines in iambic pentameter. Its style is therefore very fluid and natural; it reads as easily as if it were a prose piece. But of course the poetic structure is tightly constructed; Wordsworth’s slight variations on the stresses of iambic rhythms is remarkable. Lines such as “Here, under this dark sycamore, and view” do not quite conform to the stress-patterns of the meter, but fit into it loosely, helping Wordsworth approximate the sounds of natural speech without grossly breaking his meter. Occasionally, divided lines are used to indicate a kind of paragraph break, when the poet changes subjects or shifts the focus of his discourse.

Commentary

The subject of “Tintern Abbey” is memory—specifically, childhood memories of communion with natural beauty. Both generally and specifically, this subject is hugely important in Wordsworth’s work, reappearing in poems as late as the “Intimations of Immortality” ode. “Tintern Abbey” is the young Wordsworth’s first great statement of his principle (great) theme: that the memory of pure communion with nature in childhood works upon the mind even in adulthood, when access to that pure communion has been lost, and that the maturity of mind present in adulthood offers compensation for the loss of that communion—specifically, the ability to “look on nature” and hear “human music”; that is, to see nature with an eye toward its relationship to human life. In his youth, the poet says, he was thoughtless in his unity with the woods and the river; now, five years since his last viewing of the scene, he is no longer thoughtless, but acutely aware of everything the scene has to offer him. Additionally, the presence of his sister gives him a view of himself as he imagines himself to have been as a youth. Happily, he knows that this current experience will provide both of them with future memories, just as his past experience has provided him with the memories that flicker across his present sight as he travels in the woods.