

Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood (1807)

THEMES AND COMPARISONS
<p>Soul's Immortality</p> <p>Childhood Immediacy and the Pains of Aging</p> <p>Consolations of Memory</p> <p>Sublimity, Beauty, and Divinity of Nature</p>

Ode offers less assured definition of 'natural piety' in terms of the great losses and rewards of maturity.

*The child is father of the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*
(Wordsworth, "My Heart Leaps Up")

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,

From the listed locations ('meadow, grove, and stream') Wordsworth seemingly laments that he cannot find that lost time in these particular places (youth).

Ode's sense of loss time from its outset - Past tense ('There was a time') - no longer capable of seeing nature for its immediate beauty - proximity to the divine ('Apparelled in celestial light.')

Whilst scenery promises certain value even as an adult, it is lacking to what his younger self saw.

The earth, and every common sight,

To me did seem

Apparelled in celestial light,

To this speaker, the "celestial light" he remembers seeing in the natural world as a child is an image of the very deepest truth: that every human soul is immortal, part of a heavenly eternity. Light is still a powerful reminder of God's "glorious" beauty and benevolence. Even though the speaker only has memories of the light he saw in childhood to go by now, he still imagines it as the "master light" that guides him, helping him to have faith that he'll return to "God, who is our home" one day.

The glory and the freshness of a dream.

It is not now as it hath been of yore;—

Turn wheresoe'er I may,

By night or day.

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

The Rainbow comes and goes,

And lovely is the Rose,

The Moon doth with delight

Look round her when the heavens are bare,

Waters on a starry night

Are beautiful and fair;

The sunshine is a glorious birth;

But yet I know, where'er I go,

That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

Pastoral scene of the poetic imagination, an artificial imitative world of shepherd boys and pipes and 'thousand valleys' harking back to the Greek and Roman poets who initiated this kind of poetry.

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,

'Now' may seem to recall the speaker to the present's joyful world of time and sound.

And while the young lambs bound

As to the tabor's sound,

Overwhelmed by a sense of misery, whilst still determined to not allow his grief to spoil the May morning that all of nature seems to be celebrating.

To me alone there came a thought of grief:

A timely utterance gave that thought relief,

And I again am strong:

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;

No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;

I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,

The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,

And all the earth is gay;

Land and sea

Give themselves up to jollity,

And with the heart of May

Doth every Beast keep holiday;—

Thou Child of Joy,

Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-boy.

Characteristic of the poem is the intermixing of abstraction and concretion – aphoristic style ('The sunshine is a glorious birth' / 'Thou child of joy' / 'Whither is fled the visionary dream?')

Simple objects of nature are deified and dignified by metaphor – 'fields of sleep' certain vagueness and ambiguity in these phrases. Full of possibilities but without any precise meaning – 'the hour / Of splendor in the grass.' Suits the poem's assertion that the poet's perception of the world about him has lost its visionary intensity.

Ode's prosodic time is subject to metrical fallings, as its words seem to fall away from both its iambic metrical pattern and play of line length and rhyme. Here, the speaker tries to cheer himself up by describing the happy landscape of the present ('All the earth is gay') – almost feeling the inevitable failure of that attempt in the awkward polysyllabic cadences of the rhymes ('Sea' / 'Jollity')

Time is out of joint and falls away from the speaker who tries to grasp it: relatively strongly stressed monosyllable such as 'sea' cannot keep time with, or rhyme with a polysyllable that falls away in two relatively weakly stressed syllables in 'jollity.'

Ye blessèd creatures, I have heard the call

Ye to each other make; I see

The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;

My heart is at your festival,

My head hath its coronal,

The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.

Oh evil day! if I were sullen

While Earth herself is adorning,

This sweet May-morning,

And the Children are pulling

On every side,

In a thousand valleys far and wide,

Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,

And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:—

I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!

—But there's a Tree, of many, one,

A single field which I have looked upon,

Words that describe the day – 'festival' 'coronal' and 'jubilee' all suggest a kind of falseness and artificiality. The language that Wordsworth employs is not designed to picture an authentic scene, but to deal with general ideas – loss of vision that he felt in his childhood perception of the natural world.

Feeling of loss – transition from the talk of participation ('I hear, I hear, with joy I hear') effected by the word 'But' to the talk of the tree and field which again remind him of loss ('Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?')

Reiteration of sense of oneness/ unity with natural surroundings by affirming communion with its voices: "I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!"

Dynamic verbs – 'leaps up' - liveliness, exuberance of the child – childhood close to nature. Echoes Rousseau's doctrine of original goodness, a tempering due to rich experience of human love and reverent admission of painful duty. (ROMANTIC NOTION)

Both of them speak of something that is gone;

The Pansy at my feet

Doth the same tale repeat:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?

Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

In stanzas four and five, Wordsworth completes his metaphysical dualism and hierarchically organizes it by defining its secondary element – realm of sensory phenomena. Nature with 'no unworthy aim' offers man 'pleasures of her own' but these pleasures induce forgetfulness and distract men from remembrance of the deeper 'glories' of that 'imperial palace whence he came.'

Platonic concept that our souls pre-exist our earthly existence. Platonic recollection goes hand in hand with an idealization of infancy.

Language here is pointedly Christian, referring literally to the 'Soul' to 'God' and to 'Heaven.' If the journey of mortal life seemingly withdraws man from God's presence and diminishes his power of spiritual awareness, divinity remains fixed and stable, eternally radiant and even a source of hope and comfort to the poet amidst the darkness of human change.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness,

And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Shades of the prison-house begin to close

Upon the growing Boy,

But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,

He sees it in his joy;

The Youth, who daily farther from the east

Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,

And by the vision splendid

Is on his way attended;

At length the Man perceives it die away,

And fade into the light of common day.

In both syntax and meaning, the closing lines reiterate the individual's essential passivity in his relationship to vision which he continues to behold in the reflected splendor that accompanies him on his journey until 'At length the Man perceives it die away / And fade into the light of the common day.'

SUMMARY: Life is just a short sleep for the immortal soul, exiting before and after our mortal life. All beings come from God and in infancy, we still have knowledge of Heaven. As we grow older, through childhood and youth, this early vision grows weaker until adulthood where it fades into the light of the common day.

SUMMARY: Earth in all its natural abundance tries to distract us from remembering the beauty from whence we came.

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;

Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,

And, even with something of a Mother's mind,

And no unworthy aim,

The homely Nurse doth all she can

To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,

Forget the glories he hath known,

And that imperial palace whence he came.

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,

A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!

See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,

Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,

With light upon him from his father's eyes!

See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,

Some fragment from his dream of human life,

Shaped by himself with newly-learn'd art

A wedding or a festival,

A mourning or a funeral;

And this hath now his heart,

And unto this he frames his song:

Then will he fit his tongue

To dialogues of business, love, or strife;

But it will not be long

Ere this be thrown aside,

And with new joy and pride

The little Actor cons another part;

Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"

With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,

That Life brings with her in her equipage;

As if his whole vocation

Were endless imitation.

Contrast between real and ideal childhood with an abruptness that commands attention. Instead of sitting comfortably, the reader is jolted into an awareness of the gap between metaphor and meaning. At one hand, we have the infant is the 'best philosophy,' an 'Eye among the blind' on the other, we have infancy has a 'simple creed' of 'delight and liberty.'

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie

Thy Soul's immensity;

Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep

Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,

That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,

Is this poem representative of Wordsworth's anguish at growing old and his fear of death? Does he envy what he perceives as the small child's uncaring, boundless confidence at its own immortality. Although there is an implication of strength and recompense, the general impression is one of loss and dilution.

We are encouraged to read this section as poetic imitation or even mimesis in the Aristotelian sense

SUMMARY: Appearance of small children belies their true worth. They are philosophers, prophets, seers – capable of possessing truths that adults can barely understand. They understand their immortality, and that the grave is just a steppingstone to the next. Wordsworth dissuades children, who whilst at their most glorious, spend their time provoking age to come upon them. Burdens of adulthood will inevitably arrive. (ROMANTIC NOTION)

Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—

Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!

On whom those truths do rest,

Which we are toiling all our lives to find,

In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;

Thou, over whom thy Immortality

Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,

A Presence which is not to be put by;

Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might

Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,

Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke

The years to bring the inevitable yoke,

Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,

And custom lie upon thee with a weight,

Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

Arguably, Wordsworth's goal is not to discard one doctrine for another, but to escape from doctrine into myth where there is none abiding. His poetry of allusion pursues a strategy of elusiveness that respects the nature of emotion colored but uncaptured by thought; he weighs a value depression against a vague hope. Philosophy of Plato had a power that Christianity lacked: the power to illumine the recesses of the psyche, behind the veil of conscious belief.

O joy! that in our embers

Is something that doth live,

That Nature yet remembers

Volta in the ode where emotion begins to swamp logic – invocation of joy that even though the flames of life have been replaced by embers – we can still hold onto joy. It is only the emotional determination to 'grieve not' that opens the floodgates for the philosophy of joy.

SUMMARY: Memory of childhood is blessed – in it, we have emotions of simple delight, freedom, moments of questioning, bewilderment, first affections and dim recollections. These years shed light on all that we do, giving help and solace. They offer eternal truths that nothing we do can spoil, and from which he always have a distant sense of our immortality.

What was so fugitive!

The thought of our past years in me doth breed

Perpetual benediction: not indeed

For that which is most worthy to be blest;

Delight and liberty, the simple creed

Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,

With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:—

Not for these I raise

The song of thanks and praise

But for those obstinate questionings

Of sense and outward things,

Fallings from us, vanishings;

Blank misgivings of a Creature

Bare experience of the prosodic emphasis could emphasise the reality of time's passing within the Ode's metrical patterns prosodic certainty falls away from its reader. Time, after all, is often felt to be slipping out of the grasp as 'Fallings from us, vanishings.'

Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised:
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.
Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour

SUMMARY: We can join in on birdsong and bounding of lambs, even if nothing can return us to the glorious vision of youth. We can find strength in what is left – sympathy, faith and philosophy.

Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;

We will grieve not, rather find

The near-failure of the rhymed words, pairing the falling cadences of the polysyllabic 'sympathy' and 'suffering' with the emphatic monosyllables 'be' and 'spring' is heard the possibility that time might not be able to make anything spring out of suffering, let alone soothing thoughts.

Strength in what remains behind;

In the primal sympathy

Which having been must ever be;

In the soothing thoughts that spring

Out of human suffering;

In the faith that looks through death,

Juxtaposing past against present, he is provided with a means of gauging the changes undergone by him in the course of his development and maturation and of determining whether amidst the multiplicity of experience that some element might exist that can pose a continuing identity.

Polysyllables – 'obstinate' 'questionings' 'vanishings' 'listlessness' – cadence is a tender way to feel the losses of time, to hear the reality of the duration of existence: that reality being, of course, an existence that will not endure, that will itself fall away, not in immortality at all but in death.

In years that bring the philosophic mind.

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,

Forebode not any severing of our loves!

Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;

I only have relinquished one delight

To live beneath your more habitual sway.

I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,

Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;

The innocent brightness of a new-born Day

Is lovely yet;

The Clouds that gather round the setting sun

Do take a sober colouring from an eye

That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;

Another race hath been, and other palms are won

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,

Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,

To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Wordsworth returns to the 'meadow, grove, and stream' lost in the past tense of the first-line that are re-addressed by the present tense of the last but they return altered, capitalized, even cultivated in the replacement of 'streams' for 'fountains.'

One interpretation – ode is a joyful affirmation. Wordsworth believed that it was better to have been a poet and to have lost the glory of the calling than to have never been a poet at all. He celebrates the aesthetic experience as being its own warrant and own reward. Final note of regret should not overpower the tones of joy which it remembers and reaffirms.

Long /ee/ sound that threads through these final lines evokes the speaker's emotion and insight as he communes with a flower. That /ee/ links "me," the speaker, to that "mean[]" (or lowly) flower—and also to his "fears," his "tears," and his "deepest[]" insights – Reflection of speaker's intense connection with even the most ordinary aspects of nature – profound truth – unity between nature and eternity and the human heart

STRUCTURE

The poem is an irregular Pindaric ode in 11 stanzas that combines aspects of Coleridge's Conversation poems, the religious sentiments of the Bible and the works of Saint Augustine, and aspects of the elegiac and apocalyptic traditions. It is split into three movements: the first four stanzas discuss death, and the loss of youth and innocence; the second four stanzas describe how age causes man to lose sight of the divine, and the final three stanzas express hope that the memory of the divine allow us to sympathise with our fellow man.