

ENGH-H-CC-T-9(BRITISH ROMANTIC LITERATURE)

SEM-IV

Poem Summary: "TINTERN ABBEY" BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Lines 1-8

The rephrasing of the passage of time—first five years, then five summers, then five winters—makes the reader feel its length. Sense impressions begin almost immediately: first, the sound of water, for which the speaker imagines a deep and hidden origin; second, the sight of the cliffs, which also make the speaker imagine a place secluded and hidden.

Line 9

This line suggests the power of the poetic mind with a pun on the word "repose"—meaning to rest, but also to "pose again."

Lines 10-18

In these lines we see the effect of the poet's imagination. All is unified: the plots of ground lose themselves in the landscape, all vegetation is the same shade of green, the hedge-rows(which would normally separate the plots) are grown wild and so no longer divide the parcels of land, and wreaths of smoke connect the earth to the sky. For Wordsworth, the good poet frames, interprets, and unifies the landscape as he or she frames, interprets, and unifies all experience. And all these images demonstrate the unified results of the imagination of the poet.

Lines 19-22

The poem's title is of some significance. Tintern Abbey is a ruin of an abbey—a monastery or a convent. The fact that the Abbey is a ruin, a place unfit for habitation, implies a question: where does the spiritual person live now? The speaker, seeing the wreaths of smoke, imagines that there are "vagrant dwellers" and "hermits" making their homes in the woods. It is they who are the spiritual people of the present time, and they have learned to dwell in the woods. This perception depends on the poet's active imagination: with only the smoke as a clue, he deduces the presence of these people and imagines particulars of their lives.

Lines 23-50

In the second verse stanza the speaker asserts that what he now sees and imagines have, for the five intervening years, sustained him. They are not memories; rather they are memories which have provided pleasant sensations even after the memories themselves are gone. They are, one might say, memories of memories. It is a subtle influence—but no less important for its subtlety. Since in these lines the poet speaks about things without common names, he must make his way as he goes; his language is careful and precise. The memories of memories influence his acts of kindness and love—acts that are themselves “unremembered.” Ultimately, the world’s good seems held together by forces almost too subtle to be called “forces.” Notice that the vocabulary here borrows from religion—“blessed,” “corporeal,” “soul.” The speaker, perhaps only half-realizing it, is replacing the religion of the Abbey with a religion of the natural world.

In line 36 he acknowledges that he gained from these memories of memories an experience of the sublime, that state that allows him to transcend everyday existence. Notice that Wordsworth’s description of this experience is made of a series of phrases which suspend resolution. He begins by trying to define a “mood.” Because such a definition is so difficult, the sentence itself is not completed for fourteen and one-half lines. This state also allows perception to turn inward; the world seems to fall away, breath and heartbeat are suspended, and one becomes “a living soul.”

Line 48

This eye is Wordsworth’s term for the self-reflective mind, the mind which is contemplative and literally reflect back on itself. Wordsworth’s poem “I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud” has similar themes and uses a similar image of an “inward eye.”

Lines 51-59

The speaker begins to doubt, and stops himself. Again, we are in the territory of a religious meditation. Wordsworth remembers again that he has experienced this memory of a memory often, but for the first time he locates the source of his inspiration in a single aspect of the landscape: the River Wye. He calls it a “wanderer thro’ the woods” and so implies that like the “vagrant dwellers” and the “hermit” it has no permanent place. Like them as well, it seems to have become an abode of spirituality.

Lines 60-67

The speaker meditates now on his present state of mind, a mixture of memories and vague sadness. Again there appears an understanding of the operation of memory. The speaker imagines that as the

experience five years past provided spiritual sustenance in the years succeeding it, so the present experience will provide spiritual sustenance in the future.

Lines 68-85

The speaker considers that he is different than he was five years earlier. In those days his feeling for the woods was “coarser.” His nature was more animal-like—based on emotion rather than thought.

Lines 86-104

The speaker acknowledges that he does not regret the passing of that time because its passionate emotions have given way to more thoughtful sensations. In line 104 he describes a spirituality within himself in much the same language he used, in the first verse paragraph, to describe the sound of the waters. Implicitly, he suggests that his spirituality participates in the sound of the waters.

Lines 105-109

The speaker expresses the belief that the mind “half-creates” the world. He finds proof of this in the apparent changes in the landscape that have occurred since his last visit—changes he knows to be (and to have been) projections of his own mind; things that remain unchanged are what he perceives.

Lines 110-113

He concludes his thought with a kind of proclamation and affirmation: he is still a lover of nature. In fact, nature has become everything a religion is—even a moral guide. Significantly, nature, as a new religion and as a replacement for the Abbey, is not stationary. Like the river and perhaps represented by the river, it is “A motion and a spirit.” In these lines Wordsworth describes the kind of maturation described by Augustine and countless saints: a youth of indiscretion, a conversion, and finally, a deep and lasting spirituality.

Lines 114-136

In the final verse paragraph, the speaker—as Wordsworth—turns his attention to his sister—Dorothy—who is with him in the present moment. He hears in her a sensibility like he knew in himself five years earlier and sees his “former pleasures” in her “wild eyes.” For a moment he regrets the passing of his youthful passions and seems to ask that he be allowed to see (in her eyes) his younger self.

Lines 137-162

Here the suggestion of religion becomes explicit: the religion of the natural world is supplied a prayer. The effect of nature on memory, thought, and behaviour (which the speaker began to appreciate in the first verse paragraph) is recounted and wished upon Dorothy. More religious terms appear: he and his sister have a "faith" that nature is full of "blessings." Wordsworth shifts his subject from the natural world to the self, as that which conveys the natural world, specifically through his powers as a poet whose mind unifies experience, as suggested in the first verse paragraph. As he hopes his sister's enduring memory of him on this day will sustain her, so will his memory of her sustain him.

The poet implies that the human mind is, like the river, both powerful and fluid. As the poem concludes, this mind becomes a new religion to replace.