

P.G-SEM -II  
CC-6  
Unit 1  
THE PRELUDE-Book. I  
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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*Explore the Prelude as a psychological, spiritual growth and journey of William Wordsworth as a poet?*

*It is true that the poem is a story of the poet's own life. But its story, by itself, is not so important. The poem is the study of the origin of Wordsworth's poetic power: The Prelude is less a narrative than a study of origin, less the history of man than the philosophy of mind. In order to appraise the poetic genius of Wordsworth, let one read The Prelude in which the sources of his poetic inspiration are to be found. The Prelude is not an autobiography in the usual sense from the holy pen of the high priest of nature. In it, we have the faithful record of his inner life and emotional experiences enabling us to have a glimpse of the innermost recesses of the poet's soul.*

*This famous and lengthy poem by Wordsworth is very definitely a psychological poem in that it focuses on the thoughts and feelings of the speaker and how they develop as he ages. It is very much a poem that is interested in internal processes of thoughts and emotions rather than any external events, and as such it provides a fascinating focus on how Wordsworth felt about nature and its importance to his thinking and personality. Note, for example, the following quote, that is taken from a section in this poem where Wordsworth, in his advancing years, finds in nature a system of law and order that he feels is sadly lacking in humanity:*

*○ Soul of Nature! that, by laws divine  
Sustained and governed, still dost overflow  
With an impassioned life, what feeble ones  
Walk on this earth!*

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*This quote is interesting because it reveals a lot about Wordsworth's psychology from how he sees nature. For him, nature is not just about inspiring man through its beauty, but also presents an ordered system that mankind desperately lacks, a system that man can submit himself to and be modelled by. This reveals some very interesting aspects of Wordsworth's character as he psychologically finds it easier to abandon himself to the rules of nature in his old age than trust in the law and order of human society. At each stage of this poem therefore there are fascinating psychological insights to be seen about Wordsworth and his relationship with nature.*

*In The Prelude, Wordsworth seeks to establish a stable poetic identity for himself through the examination of recollected earlier selves. Books I and II of The Prelude describe the way time fractures Wordsworth's consciousness in the transitions between a range of temporalities and the way he attempts to use language to stabilize his identity. However, his "two consciousnesses"—"consciousness of myself / and of some other Being" (I. 16-17) At the very outset, it must be clear to us that The Prelude is not an autobiography in the usual sense. Of course in the preface to The Excursion, the poet has told us that the preparatory poem is "biographical." So, it may be biographical, but still not so in a straightforward and chronological way. Here events never follow each other in the order in which they happened. The poet discarded the simply chronological arrangement in favor of one which would just stress on the essential importance of certain experiences and states of mind. To the poet, the subjective aspect is much more important than the objective aspect of the poem. So we must be clear in*

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our mind that the subject is not "My Life," but "The Making of a Poet," although Wordsworth has used the phrase "the story of my life" (639) at the end of Book I. in *The Prelude* we get a record-a record of that inner life out of which Wordsworth's poetry grew. It's the full intense life of childhood and youth that the poet tried to capture and record. So in Books I and II we have Wordsworth's childhood and boyhood experiences amid the lovely natural surroundings. Herein lies the greater significance of these two books. And, from the poet, we get that his poetic life began, as it were, on the banks of the Derwent when he was just a suckling babe. When he found himself "Baffled and plagued by a mind that every hour / Turns recreant to her task. (I. 257-258). He appeals to the river Derwent- "... Was it for this / That one of the fairest of all rivers loved, / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song. (I. 269-271). And when the boy Wordsworth was transplanted to that "beloved Vale" of Hawkshead in Esthwaite it began, to some extent, consciously. The benign influence of Nature to shape and mould his character and poetic personality had already started. "Fair seed time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (I. 301-302). Here we see how nature was to the poet and how much it affected his soul and being. Nature for Wordsworth was more than a nurse; it was his mother, guide, and his whole being.

. *Awakening of Poet's Love of Nature* But the awakening of the poet's love of nature is the most significant element in his early education. At the early stage it was just a normal and healthy boy's love for open air sports and pastimes amidst lovely surroundings of nature. So in Books I and II we get an unforgettable recreation of his childhood involvement in physical

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activities and the joys and fears which were their consequence. In the first two Books Wordsworth tells us of various exciting activities in which he used to take part with all joy and zeal. In the first Book we have the following— "bathing, bird-snaring, bird-nesting, and expedition in a stolen boat, skating, fishing, kite-sailing, noughts, -and-crosses and cards." In the second Book, also we find they still "ran a boisterous course" and their favorite pastimes were boat-races, boating excursions on the lake, walking tours and riding on horses "through rough and smooth." 3.1 Emotions of Pleasure and Pain The first Book is studded with several impressive incidents showing us the means by which Nature affects her discipline on young Wordsworth by evoking the emotions of pleasure and fear. Thus on a hot summer day, the child would have pure animal pleasure by bathing or basking:

Oh, many a time have it a five years' child,  
In a small mill-race severed from his stream.  
Made one long bathing of a summer's day;  
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again  
Alternate, all a summer's day... (I. 288-292)

And then during his night adventure with the stolen boat, we find how he was overwhelmed with an alarming sense of panic and fright by the awful sight of a towering peak when the grim shape:

Towered up between me and the stars, and still,  
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own  
And measured motion like a living thing,  
Strode after me. (I. 382-385)

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*The Prelude: A Key to Wordsworth's Poetry*

*The Prelude is not to be viewed only as a poem of Wordsworth's life; it is a key supplied by the poet himself to unlock the door leading to his poetic chamber. With the help of this long, personal poem, a reader can understand and interpret the rest of Wordsworth's poetry more intelligently. It is a guide book for understanding comprehensively the unbroken relationship between human life and nature, without which life to Wordsworth was no life. His childhood became responsible for making Wordsworth a great poet of nature. The Prelude is the essential living document for the interpretation of Wordsworth's life and poetry. Nature and Man in Wordsworth "Wordsworth had his passion for Nature fixed in his blood," observed De Quincy (1970).*

*"It was a necessity of his being like that of the mulberry leaf to the silkworm, and through his commerce with Nature did he love and breathe."  
(p. 22).*

*Hence it was from the truth of his love that his knowledge grew. If Wordsworth had a favorite subject, it was Nature, and when he treated of man it was essentially in relation to Nature. It was the love of Nature that led him to the love of man. Wordsworth approached the spectacle of human life through Nature. When he thought of man, it was as in the presence and under the influence of effective natural objects and linked to them by many associations. These words indicate how Nature and Wordsworth used to interact faithfully and innocently with each other. And the solace and calmness the poet received from Nature positively affected his later relationships with human beings.*

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*This theme of the influence of Nature on man is the noblest part of Wordsworth's teaching in poetry. Nature is the best educator, and she is ever interested in Man and tries to impress human mind from its earliest dawn. The following words from Book I can clearly and faithfully illustrate this point:*

*I believe That Nature, often times,  
when she would frame A favour'd Being,  
from his earliest dawn  
Of infancy doth open up the clouds  
As at the touch of lightening,  
seeking him with great visitation. (362-367).*

*If we consider the above quotation carefully, we will realize how nature made the poet love human kind in general, and how the poet found solace when his soul was troubled. Three things must impress even the casual reader of The Prelude: first, Wordsworth's love to be alone, he is never lonely with nature. Second, like every other child, who spends much time in the woods and fields, he feels the presence of some living spirit, real though unseen, and companionable though silent. Finally, His early impressions make him what he, later on, becomes: "The child is the father of man" (Wordsworth, My Heart Leaps Up, p. 7)*

*. Two Versions of The Prelude as Indications of the Growth of the Poet's Mind  
A comparison of the 1805 and 1850 texts gives us further information about the growth of the poet's mind between the two dates. The critics are not agreed as to which of the two editions is better than the other; but the changes made in the original text indicate a change in Wordsworth's*

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mental powers: (1) *Bald simplicity* (of 1805) gives place to more decorative, more conventionally literary form. (2) *Rough and crude expression* is smoothed and clarified; faults of ambiguity and loose repetition are carefully amended. (3) In the early *The Prelude* Wordsworth told of the inner workings of his mind as nakedly and truthfully as he could. The changes most to be deplored in his later text are those which overlay and obscure that native expression; they often mar the poetry; more often disguise the truth. Thus, in the former version the feeling is more genuine and spontaneous, less cautious; in the latter the style is generally speaking stronger and more finished. The first reveals personality more genuinely, the second reveals him as an artist. It is generally when an autobiography deals with the author's childhood and first beginning that he most often succeeds in reaching the hearts of many of his readers. Wordsworth's life which, to many of his readers, appeared to be a monotonous affair, comes out in *The Prelude* as a life, of "pure energy from the beginning, wakeful, alert, self-willed".

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