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William Wordsworth

(1770-1850)

## What William Wordsworth did... and why you should care

William Wordsworth was an English poet, a key figure of Romanticism, and the author of the most famous poem ever written about daffodils. Born in 1770, Wordsworth and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge invented a new style of poetry in which nature and the diction of the common man trumped formal, stylized language. Their seminal 1798 poetry collection, Lyrical Ballads, helped to launch the Romantic era of English literature, in which writers sought to unite the tranquility of nature and the inner emotional world of men. Even in the nineteenth century, Wordsworth felt that the world was "too much with us"—too fast-paced, too noisy, too full of mindless entertainment. He wanted to create poetry that reunited readers with true emotions and feelings. When he wrote about a field of daffodils, he didn't want you just to think about it—he wanted you to feel those flowers, to feel the breeze against your skin and the sense of peace this sight brought to your soul.  
  
Wordsworth was the quintessential figure of Romanticism. He lived in England's scenic Lake District instead of urban London. He wrote poems in his head as he wandered through the hills and moors. He had a few different families during his adult life, some of which were unconventional—a partner and illegitimate daughter in France during the French Revolution, an unorthodox but literary household containing his sister Dorothy and Coleridge, and eventually a wife and five kids. By the time he died in 1850, Wordsworth was so famous that tourists flocked to the Lake District village of Grasmere just to peer in his windows. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that Wordsworth did "more for the sanity of this generation than any other writer."1 The world is with us far more now than it was in the nineteenth century. Maybe your soul—and your sanity—could use a little Wordsworth.

## Quick: picture a poet. Who do you see? Is it a moody, sensitive guy, wandering around a moor or a field or a forest? Congratulations! You have just conjured to mind a Romantic poet. Many of the stereotypes that we have about poets and poetry originated in this period in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Artists disillusioned with industrialization and urbanization turned to nature for inspiration, valuing emotion over reason and feeling over rationality. They sought the awesome, divine beauty that could only be experienced in the tranquility of nature and only by one willing to be quiet long enough to feel it. No one can say precisely what started the Romantic era, but its breakthrough in English literature was a 1798 volume of poetry entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, by William Wordsworth. (Poet [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](http://www.shmoop.com/coleridge/) actually wrote some of the poetry as well, but more on that later.) Wordsworth's preface to a later edition of *Lyrical Ballads* essentially became the manifesto of literary English Romanticism. The poems, he promised the reader, were free of "gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers." Their goal, instead, "was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them …in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, … and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature." William Wordsworth is a quintessential Romantic poet. He lived not in smoky, crowded London but in the rugged beauty of England's Lake District. His poems were mentally composed during long walks outdoors. He sympathized with the poor and oppressed. He romanticized peasants and children, whom he believed capable of perceiving the divine more purely than those corrupted by city living. From his childhood, he was a remarkably intense figure. And as an adult, he believed above all else that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."Put passion together with plain language and meter, Wordsworth decreed, and you've got quality poetry. Wordsworth warned readers of *Lyrical Ballads* that they would either love or hate the poetry, and the same seems to have been true of the poet himself. Wordsworth was, by all accounts, humorless and egotistical. He believed that he was a genius and liked to hang out with people who agreed with him on this point. He was so cheap that he charged tourists who visited him for tea. Despite his shortcomings, he was fortunate enough to have close companions like his sister Dorothy and friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge who were willing to sacrifice their own careers in order to advance his. Because of their efforts, and because of Wordsworth's undeniable talent and drive, we have today a beautiful body of work that speaks straight to the soul.

## Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

* While in Paris in 1792, Wordsworth met John "Walking" Stewart, an English philosopher who had spent the last thirty years trekking on foot from India to Europe. Wordsworth was deeply impressed by Stewart and his philosophies on nature.
* Wordsworth was so popular in his later years that his Grasmere home became a tourist attraction. His wife Mary wrote in 1847, "At this moment, a group of young Tourists are standing before the window (I am writing in the Hall) and Wm reading a newspaper—and on lifting up his head a profound bow greeted him from each."
* As adults, Dorothy and William Wordsworth liked to lie down next to each other outdoors and pretend that they were lying in their graves. Huh.
* A thorn in Wordsworth's side was the critic Francis Jeffrey, who was not a Wordsworth fan. His review of the long 1814 poem *The Excursion* began simply, "This will never do."
* Both Wordsworth and Coleridge liked to compose poetry in their heads while they walked. According to critic William Hazlitt, a friend of both men, Coleridge preferred to bash his way through brush and fields. Wordsworth always sought a straight gravel path.
* Wordsworth's friends were used to his egocentrism. One biographer tells a story of a dinner at the home of poet Charles Lamb, where Coleridge sat at one end of the table, talking about Wordsworth's poetry, and Wordsworth sat at the other—also talking about his poetry.
* Despite their reputation as a bunch of tortured artists, the Romantics could also get into some trouble. During an 1803 visit to see Wordsworth and Coleridge in the Lake District, critic William Hazlitt was nearly jumped by an angry gang after sexually harassing a woman at a pub (when she refused his come-ons, he lifted her skirt and spanked her—not okay). Coleridge hid him at Wordsworth's house in Grasmere. Hazlitt's reputation was harmed less by the actual incident than by Wordsworth and Coleridge's vicious gossip about it afterwards.

Shmoop Editorial Team. "William Wordsworth." Shmoop. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

# THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US

## In A Nutshell

William Wordsworth was one of the founders of the literary movement we now call Romanticism, a period covering (roughly) the years 1790 to 1824. One of the most prominent features of Romantic poetry – that means poetry from the Romantic period, not that lovey-dovey stuff you see on greeting cards – is an obsession with nature; there are a whole lot of poems about mountains, flowers, birds, you name it. In addition to talking about nature, the Romantics also spent a lot of time on gross inequalities among social classes, industrialization, the government, etc. In many ways, they resemble a lot of our modern-day advocates for the environment and social equality.  
  
William Wordsworth, the biggest nature-lover of them all, lived most of his life in a rural part of northern England called the Lake District, a land of beautiful hills, vales, and lakes. If you head over to "Best of the Web," you can see some pictures of Wordsworth's beloved Lake District. Having grown up and lived in one of the most beautiful places in England, it's no surprise that Wordsworth was worried about the potential destruction of that landscape (through deforestation, urbanization, etc.) and about humanity's increasing inability to appreciate it.  
  
It is humanity's inability to "feel" nature that most concerns the speaker of "The World is too Much with Us," a poem Wordsworth probably wrote in 1802 but didn't publish until 1807. The speaker claims that our obsession with "getting and spending" has made us insensible to the beauties of nature. "Getting and spending" refers to the consumer culture accompanying the Industrial Revolution that was the devil incarnate for Wordsworth and other "lake poets" like Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Only something as malevolent as that evil red guy with horns and a pitch-fork could make people insensible to something as beautiful as (hold your breath) the wind! But that's just it. Wordsworth's point is that our obsession with "getting and spending" has made it impossible for us to appreciate the simple beauties of the world around us.

**WHY SHOULD I CARE?**

Despite that little gap of about 200 years, the Romantic poets speak to us more than you might think. Take "The World is too Much with Us" as an example. Possibly now more than ever, people are obsessed with "getting and spending." The rise of the Internet has made anything we want, from groceries to video games, just a click away. If Internet shopping isn't your thing, just think about the number of strip malls and stores that you could potentially visit on any given day. Why bother with nature when you could wander around the mall or download a movie? That is precisely the attitude that irritated Wordsworth so much.   
  
Now, let's face it – a lot of us appreciate the natural world, but ever-increasing urbanization has made nature more and more remote. For some of us, it feels like we have to drive for hours and hours just to get to a place where there aren't a ton of street lights obstructing our view of the stars. Even though the government works hard to preserve some of the choicer parts of the natural world through natural parks, wildlife preserves, and the like, no one can deny that cities are getting bigger; bigger cities means more shops, parking lots, and freeways, and a lot less nature.   
  
William Wordsworth was an advocate for nature, and nowadays there is certainly no shortage of activists that make similar claims as Wordsworth. Sure, there are a number of differences, such as the fact that modern-day environmentalists tend to focus on how the ozone layer and forests are necessary if humanity is to avoid getting skin cancer or running out of fresh air. While things like pollution and the ozone layer weren't understood in Wordsworth's time as well as they are now, the fundamental issues are the same. Both Wordsworth and his modern-day ancestors realize that there is something in nature that keeps us alive and healthy, whether literally (modern activists) or spiritually (Wordsworth).

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## The World is Too Much With Us

## The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon! This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon, The winds that will be howling at all hours, And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers, For this, for everything, we are out of tune; It moves us not. – Great God! I'd rather be A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn; Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

## Summary:

## The speaker complains that "the world" is too overwhelming for us to appreciate it. We're so concerned about time and money that we use up all our energy. People want to accumulate stuff, so they see nothing in Nature that they can "own." According to the speaker, we've sold our souls. We should be able to appreciate beautiful events like the moon shining over the ocean and the blowing of strong winds, but it's like we're on a different wavelength from Nature. We're kind of like, "Eh." The speaker would rather be a pagan who worships an outdated religion so that when he gazes out on the ocean (as he's doing now), he might feel less sad. If he were a pagan, he'd see wild mythological gods like Proteus, who can take many shapes, and Triton, who looks like a mer-man.

## Getting at Meaning:

## Do world and nature mean the same thing in this poem, or different things. How could the world be “*too much with us”*?

## Why would the speaker rather be a pagan? What qualities does the speaker seem to attach to the word *pagan*?

## Allusion. What is the effect of alluding to the ancient Greek gods Proteus and Triton? How does this reinforce the imagery that contrasts “the world” with nature and the sea?

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

1. Why do you think the speaker is upset that people aren't moved by nature? Does he want people to be just like him?
2. Do you think Wordsworth is serious when he uses the sea and the wind as examples of inspiring natural phenomena?
3. Do you think it's fair to criticize people that find other things more interesting than nature?
4. What do you think Wordsworth would say about the destruction of the rainforest, pollution, the global warming, etc.?
5. Is there a way for humanity and nature to co-exist? Can we continue to evolve technologically without having to destroy nature?
6. Do you ever wish you could belong to another religion, culture, or nationality? Which one? How would your life be different?