Lines Written in Early Spring

POEM TEXT

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure:—
But the least motion which they made
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

SUMMARY

I heard a thousand interwoven notes of birdsong while I lay in a grove, where I was enjoying the kind of mood in which happy thoughts remind you of sad ones.

Nature connected my soul to all the beautiful creatures around me—and I felt terribly sad to think about what humanity has done to itself.

Periwinkles grew through bunches of primroses under the green trees, and I believe that all flowers find joy in the very air they breathe.

Birds hopped playfully around me. I can't know what they think, but to me, it looked like all of their tiny movements gave them a shiver of pleasure.

The budding branches spread out like opening fans to catch the breeze. In spite of myself, I have to believe that they were taking pleasure in life, too.

If my belief in all this natural joy is heaven-sent, and if all I've perceived here is part of Nature's divine plan, doesn't it make sense that I should be sad about what humanity has done to itself?

THEMES

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

"Lines Written in Early Spring" presents nature as the spirit that moves every living thing. Nature unites all the creatures of the landscape in a shared sense of joy, making them part of one big, delighted entity. But as the speaker soaks up the lovely grove around him, he finds cause not just for celebration, but for grief; humanity, in his view, is indeed part of this natural splendor, but it sure hasn't been acting that way! Instead of following nature's example and existing in peace and harmony, people fight each other and destroy the natural environments in which they live. And in separating themselves from both the natural world and each other, the poem argues that human beings have lost their connection to the joy that is their birthright.

The speaker personifies both the creatures he sees around him and nature itself, suggesting that they're all united in a single, joyful consciousness. In the grove where the speaker sits, twigs "spread out their fan," flowers "enjoy the air," and nature is a conscious force with a "holy plan." All of these entities seem to be feeling the same delight.

The speaker also uses images of interweaving and intertwining to suggest that everything in nature is connected. He hears "a thousand blended notes" of birdsong, sees the periwinkle growing "through primrose tufts," and speaks of the "link" with which nature connects his own soul to the natural beauties all around him. Not only is everything in nature inherently joyful, then, but everything also *shares* that joy—and that sharing is all part of the pleasure!

Humanity, meanwhile, fails to emulate nature's model of interconnectivity and joy. Though the speaker feels that nature has made a "link" between the human soul and the natural world, he feels that humanity has betrayed that link. He twice laments "what man has made of man"—that is, how humans have abused and rejected their unity with the world, breaking

from “Nature’s holy plan.” That nature’s plan is “holy” also suggests that he feels humans have severed not just an emotional connection to nature, but a spiritual one: a profound betrayal.

While the speaker doesn’t say outright “what man has made of man,” he doesn’t need to—and that’s the point! Even these simple words bring plenty of examples of painful human division to the reader’s mind, from war to poverty to plain old cruelty.

Nature, in this poem’s view, provides an example of interconnected, joyful harmony, a peaceful balance that every living thing takes part in. If human beings could just follow nature’s example, they too could share in that harmony—though, judging by “what man has made of man,” this is much easier said than done.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

"Lines Written in Early Spring" begins right in the middle of its action, and right in the middle of its speaker's experience. Before readers knows who (or where) this speaker is, they're launched right into his *senses* with the words, "I heard a thousand blended notes."

Right from the start, there's a sense of collective harmony here. Those "thousand notes" feel like a luxurious rush of sound. The musicians making those notes, whatever or whoever they might be, are working together to "blend" their music, creating one song out of many notes. This feeling of delightful unity is going to be at the heart of the poem's philosophy.

That sense of mysterious unity gets clarified in the second line. Now the reader knows where this speaker is: in a "grove," under the trees. Perhaps, then, the music the speaker is hearing is birdsong.

The speaker's not even sitting up, but "reclined," lying back to better enjoy the chorus. This is an idyllic picture of spring bliss. Notice, too, how the long /oh/ assonance of "notes" and "grove" connects the song to the place it comes from. Everything is working beautifully together here.

But the speaker isn't just blissed out. He's "In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind." In other words, his happy thoughts actually remind him of some sad things. The pleasure he takes in this spring grove, it seems, isn't uncomplicated—though even its bittersweetness seems "sweet" to him.

LINES 5-6

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;

Having evoked the interconnected beauty of nature in his first stanza, the speaker now talks about his own experience while sitting in the grove. Nature—here personified as a kind of goddess—has made a "link" between the speaker's soul and "her fair works," (that is, the *things* of nature, like the birdsong, the birds, and the grove itself). This goddess seems like a deeply benevolent one; her works are "fair," or beautiful, and she wants humans to share in them. That personification also means that Nature herself has human-like qualities, strengthening the human-nature connection even more. Like the "blended notes" of the birdsong, humanity and nature seem to be like interweaving, interrelated parts of the same big thing.

Notice, too, the way the speaker describes his "human soul." His soul's not a static object like a lump of gold that he carries around inside him. Rather, it *runs*, like a stream of clear water—or like the song of the birds. If his soul is connected to nature, that means he shares in a continual, joyful motion. The enjambment here reflects his thought: his sentence runs on seamlessly over the line break.

But all of these thoughts seem like the "pleasant" kind the speaker mentioned in the previous stanza. This invites the question: what are those "sad thoughts" that they're going to bring to his mind?

LINES 7-8

And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

The second half of the second stanza makes an abrupt turn to darkness. Having lifted off into a transcendent sense of union with nature in lines 5 and 6, the speaker is suddenly "grieved"; here are those "sad thoughts" he promised in the first stanza! And what grieves him? "What man has made of man."

This feels like an awfully big thing to grieve. What *has* man "made of man"? The speaker doesn't say. But then again, he doesn't need to. Any human can think for two seconds about grief-worthy things that "man has made of man" and come up with endless answers: war, poverty, cruelty of all stripes. Merely being human means that one has plenty of insight into humanity's failings.

The sound of that final line emphasizes its grimness. Every word in this line is a single syllable, like a drumbeat—an impression emphasized by the thumping alliterative /m/ of "What man has made of man." There's also a metrical change here: the first three lines of the stanza use iambic tetrameter

(four da-DUM beats in a row), but this one uses trimeter, cutting off abruptly after only three da-DUMs:

> What man | has made | of man.

Notice, too, that this thought doesn't arrive all on its own. As the speaker moves from the first half of the stanza, with its beautiful thoughts of the human soul's connection to nature, he uses an unexpected conjunction to start his darker reflections: "And." It's not *in spite of* his connection with the natural world that he mourns, but *because of* it. If humanity is intimately linked with the harmonious joy he's spent the first lines of the poem evoking, then the mess that "man has made of man" is all the more tragic. It just doesn't have to *be* this way, the speaker seems to think.

LINES 9-12

> *Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,*
> *The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;*
> *And 'tis my faith that every flower*
> *Enjoys the air it breathes.*

From his "sad thoughts" regarding the mess that "man has made of man," the speaker turns back to the vivid, immediate, physical world of nature around him in the grove. He's immersed once more in its beauty as he looks at the fresh new "primrose tufts" and "periwinkle"—both distinctly springy flowers.

These flowers, like the notes of birdsong and the speaker's soul, seem to be interwoven. The periwinkle grows "through" the primrose—and, like the goddess Nature in the second stanza, it's personified, "trail[ing] its wreaths" like a nymph. The alliterative sounds here reflect the interweaving, matching the /p/ and /t/ sounds of "primrose tufts" and "periwinkle trailed."

Note how the speaker constructs this stanza so that it runs parallel to the one before it. The first two lines once again come to a gentle pause with an end-stopped semicolon, while the next lines begins with an "And." This suggests a link between what the speaker perceives (all those flowers) and the philosophy he draws from it.

Here, that philosophy is an impassioned statement of belief: "'tis my faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes." Watching the intertwining flowers, he can only feel that they're not just alive, but *loving* life. And the soft alliterative /f/ sounds of "faith" and "flower," which themselves sound like puffs of breath, suggest that the speaker, too, breathes that same pleasurable air.

LINES 13-16

> *The birds around me hopped and played,*
> *Their thoughts I cannot measure:—*
> *But the least motion which they made*
> *It seemed a thrill of pleasure.*

From the flowers, the speaker turns to the birds, and reads a similar "thrill of pleasure" in every one of their little hops and scurries.

While the speaker deeply believes in the birds' "pleasure" in life, he admits that "Their thoughts I cannot measure." In other words, he can't *actually* know what the birds are thinking. Similarly, he has to have "faith" in the flowers' enjoyment of the air in the previous stanza.

This sheds some light on the way he's been using personification in the poem more broadly. The speaker is certainly experiencing the pleasure of being alive himself—and part of that pleasure is *reading* pleasure in the living world around him. This seems to be a relationship of give and take. If "Nature" has made a "link" between the speaker's "human soul" and the world around him, the flow of that link seems to go in both directions: the speaker's human pleasure in observing nature seems to *inhabit* the birds and flowers, as much as it's *taken* from the birds and flowers.

But it's also important to recognize that the speaker stays a little separate from these creatures—hence why he can only assume what the birds and flowers are feeling.Difference, the poem implies, is as much a part of the harmony of nature as connection; if the "blended notes" of birdsong in the first stanza were all the same, there wouldn't be any music!

LINES 17-20

> *The budding twigs spread out their fan,*
> *To catch the breezy air;*
> *And I must think, do all I can,*
> *That there was pleasure there.*

That feeling that the speaker is inhabiting nature as much as he's inhabited by nature continues in this next stanza, where he seems almost to feel the personified "budding twigs" stretching as they "spread out their fan, / To catch the breezy air." And those alliterative /b/ sounds of "budding" and "breezy" hit like the playful buffets of a fresh spring breeze.

Once again, there's structural parallelism in this stanza—specifically, in the movement from the speaker's *impression* in the first two lines into a *philosophy* or belief in the last (the speaker sees the twigs, which leads the speaker to think "there was pleasure there). And again, a form of the word "pleasure" shows up. There's a feeling here of both immersion and insistence. The speaker just keeps getting hit with waves of pleasure—so much so that he "must" think it's there, he has no choice. This experience of pleasure is so overwhelming that it maybe even overcomes a little doubt in him: that he "must think, do all I can, / That there was pleasure there," suggests that he's putting his faith in this pleasure in spite of himself. For, remember, these "pleasant thoughts" are always closely followed by "sad thoughts."

LINES 21-24

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

Having felt the same overwhelming sense of pleasure in the birds, the flowers, and the trees, the speaker comes back at last to those "sad thoughts" of the first stanza. In this last stanza, he speaks rather like a philosopher, working out a reasonable argument. *If* all that I've experienced is true and holy, he asks, *then* isn't it reasonable that I should mourn "What man has made of man?"

Here, his experience seems to have become a religion to him. His "faith that every flower / enjoys the air it breathes" now registers as a message from "heaven" itself, and the goddess Nature's delight-driven plan isn't just hedonistic, but "holy." The pleasure he's shared with the whole natural world seems to him an intrinsic part of life. And if the human soul shares a "link" to all of this glory, then humans should be able to live in the same constant joy as the flowers and the birds.

But humans don't. With his final rhetorical question—"Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?"—the speaker reaches out to include the reader in his experience. He leaves the reader in a bittersweet state rather like the one he describes: the sweetness of the natural joy humans *could* live in, the bitterness of the sad separation from nature and each other that humans *do* live in.

SYMBOLS

SPRING

Spring is named only in the poem's title, but it plays a major symbolic role here. Spring generally represents rebirth, and the fact that the speaker's thoughts of joyful natural unity take place in the spring suggests that these thoughts are connected to the speaker's hopes for some kind of renewal.

The poem is filled with signs of spring even if it doesn't mention it directly. Notice how the birds and flowers of this poem are all emphatically "springy" creatures: new buds, fresh tufts of primroses, and hopping songbirds all call to mind the changing season. They also all share a deep pleasure in merely being alive. But in spite of the fact that humans are also connected to this pleasure, the speaker argues that they've pretty severely betrayed that connection.

While the speaker has cause to lament over this betrayal, he offers some hope by setting the poem in the season when what seemed to be dead in the winter comes back to life. In other words, while humans have forgotten their connection to nature, setting the poem during a season of rebirth suggests that they might just be able to regain it someday.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "While in a grove I sate reclined,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Through primrose tufts, in that green bower, / The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;"
- **Line 11:** "every flower"
- **Line 13:** "The birds around me hopped and played,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "The budding twigs spread out their fan, / To catch the breezy air;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Much of the alliteration in "Lines Written in Early Spring" leans on one sound: /m/. This is the repeated sound that gives the poem's lament over "What man has made of man" its punch. That emphatic /m/, and the diacope on the word "man," draws attention to the speaker's belief that humanity's problems are all our own fault, the consequence of splitting ourselves off from the inherent joy of nature: "man" has only "man" to blame for the world's suffering.

Alliteration also gives both musicality and meaning to the gentler parts of the poem. Take a look at the patterns of sound in the third stanza:

> Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
> The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
> And 'tis my faith that every flower
> Enjoys the air it breathes.

The repetition of a /p/ followed by a /t/ in "primrose tufts" and "periwinkle trailed" matches sound to action: the sounds here intertwine just like the plants do. And the soft, repeated /f/ sound of "faith" and "flower" sounds rather like a breath of the "air" the speaker imagines those flowers enjoy. Later, the "budding" twigs that catch the "breezy" air carry in their /b/ sound the bursting roundness of the buds and the playful blows of the spring breeze.

Alliteration thus both evokes the harmony of nature and humanity's failure to live in that harmony.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "mood"
- **Line 4:** "mind"
- **Line 7:** "much"
- **Line 8:** "man," "made," "man"
- **Line 9:** "primrose," "tufts"

- **Line 10:** “periwinkle,” “trailed”
- **Line 11:** “faith,” “flower”
- **Line 14:** “measure”
- **Line 15:** “motion,” “made”
- **Line 17:** “budding”
- **Line 18:** “breezy”
- **Line 24:** “man,” “made,” “man”

ASSONANCE

The soft assonance that runs through "Lines Written in Early Spring" adds gentle music to the speaker's vision of the surrounding grove. Patterned sounds fit in well with the speaker's fervent belief in interconnection. His sounds weave around each other just as the flowers and leaves weave around him.

Moments of assonance also often come alongside moments of alliteration. For instance, take a look at lines 14-16:

> Their thoughts I cannot measure:—
> But the least motion which they made
> It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

Notice how the long /ee/ sounds of "least" and "seemed" work with the alliterative /m/s of "measure," "motion," and "made"? Together, they make the speaker's impression of the hopping birds sound that much more harmonious: less like everyday speech, more like singing.

Assonance sometimes works to support meaning, too—as in line 21, when the speaker imagines that his belief in natural joy is "sent" from "heaven." Here, the matched short /eh/ vowel sounds nice, but it also connects heaven to what it sends—precisely the point the poem has been making.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “notes”
- **Line 2:** “grove”
- **Line 9:** “green”
- **Line 10:** “wreaths”
- **Line 15:** “least”
- **Line 16:** “seemed”
- **Line 21:** “heaven,” “sent”

ENJAMBMENT

"Lines Written in Early Spring" features a mix of enjambment and end-stop. The first enjambment appears in line 3, which ends with the speaker's reference to "that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind." This is a simple way of describing a complex feeling. The speaker's bittersweet emotion, in which "pleasant thoughts" flow seamlessly into "sad thoughts," is mirrored in the shape of the sentence that contains it, as it flows over the line break.

Enjambment often serves a similar purpose throughout the poem, reflecting the speaker's philosophy of universal interconnection. Consider how this works in the second stanza, which starts:

> To her fair works did Nature link
> The human soul that through me ran [...]

Here, the spilling-over of one line into the next matches up with the thematic ideas at play: Nature as a linker-up of souls and nature, and the soul itself as something that *runs*, like a stream of water.

But then enjambment does something different, speaking not of continuity, but of sharp disconnection:

> And much it grieved my heart to think
> What man has made of man.

Here, perhaps, the reader is meant to be a little *startled* "to think / What man has made of man." The enjambment tips the reader over suddenly into a line whose emphatic sounds—strong alliteration on /m/, diacope on the word "man"—come to an abrupt halt after only three beats, rather than the four beats of the stanza's first lines. Enjambment thus supports the poem's ideas of pleasurable connection, but also of sad alienation.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** “thoughts / Bring”
- **Lines 5-6:** “link / The”
- **Lines 7-8:** “think / What”
- **Lines 11-12:** “flower / Enjoys”
- **Lines 15-16:** “made / It”
- **Lines 17-18:** “fan, / To”
- **Lines 23-24:** “lament / What”

PERSONIFICATION

Personification plays an important part in this poem's philosophy, providing a vivid image of the way the speaker imagines the natural world interweaving with that of human beings.

"Nature" itself is personified here, almost as a kind of goddess: a mighty, benevolent figure with a "holy plan" to unite the world in pleasure. Through her power, *everything* seems to take on a human-like consciousness. The periwinkle actively "[trails] its wreaths" through the primrose, and the "budding twigs spread out their fan" like a lady sitting in the sun. Not only do the plants move, they *feel*. In this speaker's eyes, flowers don't just breathe, but "[enjoy] the air."

Even the birds, who are less explicitly personified than the

plants, seem to have "thoughts"—though the speaker admits he can't "measure" them himself. But their movements, too, reveal their conscious inner lives, appearing to give them "a thrill of pleasure."

While the speaker can't quite find his way into a full mind-meld with the birds, he's still got a "link" to all the creatures around him—one that "Nature" herself put there. His use of personification suggests a reciprocity and an interconnection between what is human and what is natural. Nature, in this poem, has a human-like consciousness—but humans also need to find their nature-like consciousnesses to partake of all the pleasure the goddess lays out for them.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "To her fair works did Nature link / The human soul that through me ran;"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Through primrose tufts, in that green bower, / The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;"
- **Lines 11-12:** "And 'tis my faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes."
- **Lines 13-14:** "The birds around me hopped and played, / Their thoughts I cannot measure:—"
- **Lines 17-18:** "The budding twigs spread out their fan, / To catch the breezy air;"
- **Lines 19-20:** "And I must think, do all I can, / That there was pleasure there."
- **Line 22:** "If such be Nature's holy plan,"

REPETITION

Repetition appears throughout "Lines Written in Early Spring," both creating and shattering the poem's atmosphere of rich natural joy.

The most obvious repetition in this poem is that of a full line, in which the speaker grieves over "What man has made of man." These important words aren't just repeated at the beginning and end of the poem, but repetitive in themselves: notice the strong alliteration on /m/ and the diacope of the word "man." The speaker really wants to make sure that the reader thinks this line over. He isn't going to *explain* "What man has made of man." He expects the reader to know that he's talking about the endless evils of human life and human civilization—evils so great that only a huge, general statement of "What man has made of man" can hope to encompass them.

The forceful repetition of this line stands in contrast with the joyful atmosphere of the rest of the poem—an atmosphere that one of the speaker's other repetitions helps to create. When he returns to the word "pleasure" at the end of the fourth and fifth stanzas, he seems to be insisting on just how much of it there is to be found in nature: everywhere he looks, he sees this same delight.

That "pleasure" also draws the reader back to the "pleasant thoughts" of line 3. But these kinds of thoughts can't help but "Bring sad thoughts to the mind." The diacope on the word "thoughts" suggests the burden of being human in a world where humans have divorced themselves from nature. This speaker can't appreciate the "pleasant thoughts" of this spring day without "sad thoughts" of human failings. (Note that this moment is also an example of antithesis.)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "pleasant thoughts"
- **Line 4:** "thoughts"
- **Line 8:** "What man has made of man."
- **Line 16:** "pleasure"
- **Line 20:** "pleasure"
- **Line 24:** "What man has made of man?"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

This whole poem builds toward a final rhetorical question—a climax that is also a return to one of the poem's earliest thoughts.

When the speaker begins his poem, he's having a grand old time lying in a beautiful grove, but his feelings are a little more complicated than this setting might at first suggest. From within "that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind," the speaker enjoys the rapturous pleasure he sees in the natural world around him. But he can't help but be reminded of "What man has made of man"—that is, how humanity has divorced itself from this pleasure, which seems so instinctive and so bountiful.

When the speaker returns to his thoughts of human failings at the end of the poem, he does so in the form of a question: "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" In posing his "lament" as an unanswerable question, the speaker reaches out to the listening reader—who, as a fellow-human, is just as implicated in "What man has made of man" as the speaker himself.

The question also gives the poem a sting of appalled disbelief: there's a touch of "can you even believe what we've done?" in the tone here.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-24:** "If this belief from heaven be sent, / If such be Nature's holy plan, / Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?"

VOCABULARY

Sate (Line 2) - An old-fashioned way of saying "sat."

Fair (Line 5) - Beautiful, lovely.

Grieved (Line 7) - For the speaker to say that his thoughts "grieved his heart" means that those thoughts made him sad.

Primrose tufts (Line 9) - Primroses are yellow flowers that grow in "tufts," little clumps.

Bower (Line 9) - A shady area beneath trees.

Periwinkle (Line 10) - A small, blue flower

'Tis (Line 11) - An old-fashioned way of saying "it is."

Lament (Line 23) - Mourn.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The 24 lines of "Lines Written in Early Spring" are broken up into six stanzas, each containing four lines (making them quatrains). These are also ballad stanzas—meaning they follow a simple ABAB rhyme scheme and have a specific meter (more on that in a moment).

This poem actually comes from an important collection called *Lyrical Ballads*, in which Wordsworth and his fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge resurrected old poetic traditions like the folk ballad. (See the Context section for more on this.) "Lines Written in Early Spring" is actually not just a ballad, but a *lyrical* ballad—meaning its pleasing form is meant to beautifully reflect the speaker's emotion.

That said, the poem isn't always consistent in following the ballad form. The ways in which this poem differs from standard ballads serve the speaker's larger meaning:

- In the poem's first, second, third, and sixth stanzas, three lines of iambic tetrameter (four da-DUMs) build up to a single line of iambic trimeter (*three* da-DUMs). That even, steady build followed by abrupt change fits in with the poem's reflections on how humanity has fallen out of step with natural rhythms.
- Meanwhile, the fourth and fifth stanzas, which describe the pure delight of the natural world, use more traditional ballad meter (alternating lines of tetrameter and trimeter)—and their balance reflects the harmony they describe.

For more on this, head to the Meter section of this guide.

METER

"Lines Written in Early Spring" uses a couple of different metrical patterns. Most of the stanzas use three lines of iambic tetrameter (four da-DUMs) capped with a single line of iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs). Here's stanza 1 to show this how that looks in context:

I heard | a thou- | sand blend- | ed notes,
While in | a grove | I sate | reclined,
In that | sweet mood | when pleas- | ant thoughts
Bring sad | thoughts to | the mind.

The meter isn't perfect; there's a spondee in the second foot of line 3 (a foot consisting of two stressed beats in a row, "sweet mood") and a trochee in the second foot of line 4 (a stressed beat followed by an unstressed beat, "thoughts to"). Small variations like these are pretty common in poetry, since they keep things from getting to stilted; overall, the iambic rhythm is strong.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, however, something a little different happens. These stanzas use ballad meter—that is, alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, like this:

The bud- | ding twigs | spread out | their fan,
To catch | the bree- | zy air;
And I | must think, | do all | I can,
That there | was plea- | sure there.

As the speaker reflects on the harmony of nature (and the disharmony of humanity), his rhythms match the movements of his mind. The more evenly-balanced ballad stanzas describe only the joys of nature. The stanzas that build up from tetrameter to a final line of trimeter, on the other hand, often have stings in their tails. The speaker's "sad thoughts" about "what man has made of man" feel particularly punchy because their lines, only three beats long, come to a surprise halt.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem, like many that Wordsworth wrote, uses a simple rhyme scheme that hearkens back to traditional songs and ballads:

ABAB

Wordsworth valued plainness in language, and his easy pattern here suits his poem's philosophy of simple natural harmony. But as the reader has perhaps already noted, this rhyme scheme isn't totally uniform. In fact, the poem breaks from its own scheme in the very first stanza. Here, "notes" and "thoughts" *almost* rhyme, but not exactly—a type of matching known as slant rhyme.

This choice to kick the poem off with a rhyme that's just slightly off-kilter makes a lot of thematic sense. "Lines Written in Early Spring" is a poem about how humanity has fallen out of the natural rhythm of nature, and this first mismatched sound echoes that idea.

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is a sensitive, thoughtful soul. He feels himself to be deeply connected to the world around him—so much so that his sense of natural joy becomes his "faith," his religion.

Perhaps because of his sensitivity, he also deeply feels the pains of the world. The beauty and pleasure he experiences on this spring morning reminds him that human life *could* be like this always, but isn't, because of human folly.

The reader may note that we're calling the speaker "he" here, though this person isn't gendered in the poem. We made this decision by drawing on some literary context. Wordsworth often wrote poetry in the first person, from a perspective that seems very much his own. One of his most famous works, the *Prelude*, is explicitly autobiographical, and shares many themes and ideas with this poem. We've thus decided to treat this speaker as an avatar for Wordsworth himself. But that's certainly not the only way to read this poem, and it's up to the reader to decide how to interpret the speaker here!

SETTING

As the title says, it's early spring in this poem's world—a time of birdsong and lush new growth. Looking around him as he lies at his ease in a beautiful grove, the speaker sees wildflowers, budding trees, and hopping birds. This is a landscape of freshness, joy, and renewal. Perhaps the setting's springiness reflects a quiet hope: spring, after all, follows winter, and even if humanity is living through some self-imposed darkness, there's still the chance that it will one day find new life through its connection to nature.

This setting also works on a very human scale. The speaker doesn't have to go and stand on a cliff and look out over a whole vista to feel his deep connection with nature. All he needs is a little grove with room to lie down in.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the greatest thinkers and poets of the Romantic era. His sense of the holiness of nature, the spiritual depth of childhood, and the value of every human soul would forever change the literary landscape.

"Lines Written in Early Spring" is a poem from one of Wordsworth's most important works: *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaborative volume he wrote with his close friend (and fellow poet) Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This collection of poems resurrected the plain language and steady rhythms of the English ballad tradition, and it matched its subjects to its style. Wordsworth's poems focused on the simple joys of daily life in the countryside, while Coleridge's told folkloric tales of dangerous magic. All this was wildly innovative for the time, and stood in sharp stylistic contrast to the elegance of the previous generation of writers (like Alexander Pope).

This single, paradigm-changing volume is often credited as the official start of English Romanticism. This was an artistic movement during the first half of the 19th century that glorified emotion over reason and expressed deep awe for the natural world, a realm that the Romantics took as overwhelming in its magnificence. Romanticism was, at least in part, a response to the Industrial Revolution and Age of Enlightenment, which saw the increasing urbanization of society and reliance on scientific inquiry. "Lines Written in Early Spring" reflects these Romantic ideas—championing the joyful harmony of nature and lamenting the mess that human beings have apparently made of things.

Wordsworth had a tremendous influence on generations of poets who followed him—though the younger Romantic poets, like Keats and Byron, became disenchanted with him as he lost the fervor of his youth and settled into a comfortably conservative old age. By the time Queen Victoria made him Poet Laureate in 1843, his best and most important work was behind him. That work nonetheless lives on; poems like "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" remain some of the most famous and influential in the world to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth lived through a chaotic time in European history. During his youth, he traveled to France in the midst of the Revolution, when citizens rose up and toppled their despotic monarchy. Like many of his Romantic contemporaries, Wordsworth was at first inspired by this rebellion, seeing it as the beginning of a new age of liberty. But he was soon disillusioned and horrified by the bloody excesses of the Terror, when the newly-installed French Republic mercilessly beheaded countless political prisoners.

England, too, went through a crisis of leadership during Wordsworth's lifetime, when King George III's health deteriorated and his shiftless son George IV was installed as Prince Regent. The young Regent's slothful, self-indulgent, pleasure-loving ways were seen as an insult to his struggling people—especially rural people, who endured years of famine in the early 19th century.

Wordsworth's first-hand experience of the dangers of revolution made him uneasy with the anti-monarchical political rumbles around him in England—and relieved, toward the end of his life, by the stability and power of the English monarchy under Queen Victoria.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Wordsworth at 250 — Read about a recent celebration of Wordsworth's 250th birthday. He's still one of the world's best-known and best-loved poets in the world! (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/27/william-wordsworth-250th-anniversary-mass-reading-stephen-fry-brian-cox)
- A Short Film Based on the Poem — Watch a recent short film interpretation of the poem (and hear it read in a thick Scottish accent). (https://youtu.be/HPJeMRswLeY)
- Wordsworth's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Wordsworth, and find links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- Lyrical Ballads — Check out the famous collection in which this poem first appeared. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9622/9622-h/9622-h.htm)
- Wordsworth's Creative Process — Watch a short reenactment of Wordsworth writing one of his most famous poems—including some background on his collaboration with his sister Dorothy, from whose journals he took a lot of his images. (https://youtu.be/d5-KMRUxyug)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

HOW TO CITE

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