

IT IS A BEAUTEOUS EVENING, CALM AND FREE (William Wordsworth)

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Romanticism

- Romanticism was a literary movement that began in the late 18th century. It is generally dated 1790s-1850s.
- The proponents of the movement were disillusioned with the focus and emphasis on science and 'progress' that characterised the Enlightenment era and the Industrial Revolution (1760s-1840s).
- They re-focused attention on God and the centrality of nature.
- They were opposed to the exploitation of the poor (and the children).
- They emphasised individuality and freedom from conventions and rules.

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- The main features of the Romanticism were:
 1. Emphasis on individuality
 2. Spontaneity
 3. Freedom from rules
 4. Solitary life
 5. Imagination is superior to reason
 6. Devotion to beauty
 7. Love of and worship of nature

continue

8. Purity of childhood

9. Idealization of women

10. Critique of progress ('civilization')

11. Subjectivity

12. Religion and spirituality

13. Philosophical about nature and humanity, adulthood and childhood, imagination and reality

continue

The poet

- William Wordsworth was one of the leading poets of the Romanticism movement.
- He was born in Cumberland, England.
- His parents passed on when he was young. He was raised by his uncle in Lake District.
- He was educated at Hawkshead and St. John's College. He enjoyed his time at Hawkshead. He once commented, 'I grew up fostered alike by beauty and by fear.'
- He did not enjoy his stay at St. John's and felt repelled. He once commented, 'was not for that hour, nor that place,'

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- In 1790 he visited France. (It was during the French Revolution and he sympathised with the 'republicans').
- After graduating, in 1791, he returned to France. He fell in love with Annette Vallon.
- Annette Vallon conceived. Unfortunately, before the child was born Wordsworth returned to England (because a war had broke out between France and England).
- Back in England he was touched by the abandoned mothers, children, beggars, vagrants and the victims of England's wars. His experiences during this time feature in most of his poems.
- He became friends and partner with Samuel Coleridge (another colourful English poet of Wordsworth's time).

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Context

- Wordsworth wrote the poem in 1802. It was published in 1807.
- The poem was published in a collection of poems called *Poems, in Two Volumes*.
- It was inspired by the evening walks that Wordsworth often took with his love child, Caroline. Dorothy, Wordsworth's sister who gave him a break in life, wrote in her journal, 'We walked by the seashore almost every evening with Annette and Caroline or William and I alone.'

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- NOTE: The poem does not mention the child by name because: it was scandalous to conceive a child out of wedlock and therefore, the poet had to protect the child and her mother; Wordsworth could not marry the child's mother, Annette Vallon because: 1. war broke out between France and England, 2. he had no profession and no money, 3. he was a Protestant and Annette Vallon was a Roman Catholic.)
- In 1802, Wordsworth visited France (accompanied by his sister, Dorothy) to see his child and to inform Annette Vallon that he would be marrying another woman. During his stay in Calais (where Annette and Caroline lived), they often took strolls on the seashore.

The poem: summary



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The speaker (certainly the poet), walks along the seashore with a young companion (line 9). (It is believed that the child/girl was Caroline, Wordsworth's love child). The speaker is struck by the serene scenery of seashore at sunset (lines 1-5). He compares this time to 'holy time' (line 2). It is breath-taking like a nun in prayer ('adoration') (lines 2-3). The sun goes down, creating a tranquil mood (line 4). The sky, at the horizon, hovers over the sea gently (line 5). The sound of sea waves on the shore is heard and it makes the speaker imagine God ('a mighty Being'), moving with 'a sound like thunder' (line 8).

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- He then turns to his companion and assures her that, even though she does not notice, she is no 'less divine' (line 11) than nature (the majestic scenery) because (unlike him), she is one with nature and God as she is holy (suggested by 'the allusion to Abraham's bosom' and 'And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine'.)

Analysis

- Line 1: It is a beautiful evening, calm and free

Note:

- The ideas of the Romantics:
nature ('beautiful evening')
and the ideal of freedom are
evident.



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Lines 2-3: The holy time is quiet as a nun
Breathless with adoration

- This image (a simile) of the evening compared to a nun is strange and unconventional. Can you notice the contradictions? A nun is hardly free! We cannot imagine a nun expressing romantic feelings!



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- * The speaker finds the time (evening) a good time for prayer. He calls it 'holy time'.
- * The beauty of the evening is breath-taking (Like a young lady awed by the sight of a young man.)

continue

Lines 2-4: ... the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquility

The sun goes down and
silence descends, creating a
tranquil mood.

Note: The sun is personified.



continue

Line 5: The gentleness of heaven is on the sea

Gazing at the horizon, the speaker sees a magnificent view. It seems the sky is covering or brooding over the sea.

Note: The sky is personified. It is 'gentle'.



continue

Lines 6-8: Listen! The mighty Being is awake,
And doth with eternal motion make
A sound like thunder – everlastingly.

The speaker hears the sound of the sea waves hitting the shore. This makes him imagine God. His (God's) movement makes a thunder-like sound. This is an allusion to the story of creation in the bible (Genesis 1: 1-2)

Note: This contrasts the image of the 'tranquility' and 'gentleness' alluded to in the lines 4-5.

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Lines 9: Dear child! Dear girl! That walkest with me here

*Here the speaker turns to his companion and addresses her. It appears the child does not see or experience what the speaker is experiencing (line 10) 'If thou appear untouched by solemn thought'.

Note: This line is a volta or turn. It is the beginning of the sestet.

* It is generally believed that the child, the girl was Caroline Vallon, Wordsworth's love child. She was about 9 or 10 years old in 1802.

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Lines 10-13:

If thou appear untouched by solemn thought
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Ahraham's bosom all the year,
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine



continue

- The speaker expresses love to his companion.
- He compares her to the beautiful evening ('Thy nature is not therefore less divine')
- He says the child is in the presence of God ('Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year')
- Like the nun in line 2-3, she worships 'at the Temple's inner shrine'

Note:

1. 'Abraham's bosom' is a biblical allusion. It suggests that the child is safe in God's presence.
2. The child is holy and like the Jewish high priest, she can get into the 'holy of holies' in the Temple.

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Note:

1. The theme of the innocence of children is highlighted.
2. Diction evokes the theme of religion ('solemn', 'divine', 'Abraham's bosom', 'Temple', 'shrine').
3. Old English words are also used in the bible ('thou', 'thy', 'walkest', 'liest', 'worship'st').

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1. The title

- Typical of sonnets, the title is the first line of the poem.
- It shows that the speaker is awestruck by the physical beauty of the evening and the mood it creates. He describes it as 'calm and free'.
- The speaker views the scene through a spiritual lens.

2. Type and form

- The poem is an Italian/Petrarchan sonnet.
- The octave describes the scenery/the evening, and the sestet addresses the young companion, a girl-child, comparing her to the scene/the evening.
- The sestet focuses on spirituality of the scene and life in general.

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- The rhyme scheme is ABBA ABBA CDE CED. It reflects organisation and harmony.

3. Atmosphere

- The atmosphere is mysterious and sacred.

4. Themes

4.1 Sunset

- The poet praises the calmness of evening. He likes the fact that it is free and a leisure time.
- He compares sunset to worship ('holy time'). The sacredness of the time is further emphasised by the image of a nun 'in adoration'/prayer and later the image of a temple.

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4.2 The beauty of nature reveals God

- The sunset is so beautiful because heaven is present in the sky at this time.
- Behind the sea is 'a mighty Being' or God.
- Gazing at a sunset is the same as being present in the Temple to adore God.

4.3 Children are connected to nature

* The child is no less divine than the sunset; she is part of nature and in the 'inner shrine'.

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4.4 Father-daughter relationship

- Typical of the Romantics, Wordsworth idealises women (his daughter).
- The word 'dear' expresses his love for his daughter.
- She is compared to nature.
- Her innocence is contrasted to the adult's experience of God. She is close to God compared to the speaker himself.

Revision questions

1. Describe the mood in the opening line of the poem. Use your own words.
2. Why is the simile 'quiet as a nun' a particularly effective figure of speech?
3. How can the sea have 'the gentleness of heaven' on it?
4. How and why does the beginning of line 6 change the atmosphere?
5. What is the purpose of the capital letter in 'Being' (line 6)
6. What is the function of the dash in line 8?
7. How does the tone of 'Dear child! Differ from 'Listen!'?
8. Explain the comparison used in the metaphor 'Abraham's bosom'.
9. Discuss how the structure of the poem supports its contents.