

## Poetry - Wordsworth | Sample answer

### **“The poetry of William Wordsworth has much to offer the modern reader”. Discuss the relevancy of Wordsworth’s themes and language in today’s world.**

Through his vivid and sensual poetry, Wordsworth provides today’s reader, swept up in the throes of modern life, an unparalleled opportunity for both reflection on the transience of life and rediscovery of the natural world. His thematic exploration of the passing of time and the inevitability of death in poems such as ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ and ‘She dwelt among the untrodden ways’ make for sobering reading for anyone who has become consumed by the insignificant trials of daily life, while ‘Skating’ (from ‘The Prelude’) and ‘It is a beauteous evening calm and free’ provide us with the perspective we need to look at the bigger picture. In ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’ Wordsworth’s infectious enthusiasm for the world around him offers today’s reader the opportunity to join him in his appraisal of the natural world and to enrich their own lives in the process.

With our heads ever more focused on an uncertain future, Wordsworth’s poetry offers the modern reader ruminations on time and place which teach us to better appreciate both. In ‘Skating’ the poet recalls a happy memory from his childhood “a time of rapture” in which, for a brief moment, he feels connected to the wider universe surrounding him. The moment of reflection experienced by the boyhood Wordsworth provides an important metaphor for our ever more overstimulated selves to contemplate. At first the poem runs on dynamic verbs and an urgent rhythm as Wordsworth shoots across the ice with his friends “like an untired horse” but all at once the poet becomes ponderous and stops to consider the world around him. He says that “I, reclining back upon my heels, stopped short, yet still the solitary cliffs wheeled by me.” The mood becomes subdued and reverential and, though we may not realise it, Wordsworth is teaching us a vital lesson about the transience of life. By stopping on his skates and considering the world around him, he is showing us the importance of moments of reflection in our busy day to day lives, a sort of mindfulness which is becoming ever more relevant as our world speeds up. Wordsworth’s

message in this poem is timeless and his use of contrast between the activity of skating and the silent landscape around him is as important an observation now as it has ever been.

Wordsworth offers a similar insight into the importance of living one's life in the present moment in "It is a beautiful evening calm and free". In this Petrarchan sonnet, Wordsworth watches the sun set with his daughter, a scene ripe for contemplation on the passing of time. We can tell from reading this poem that Wordsworth's attention is completely consumed by the moment at hand and the little girl that walks with him. The "broad sun is sinking down in its tranquility" the "gentleness of nature broods o'er the sea" and in this moment Wordsworth appreciates everything he has. Just as in 'Skating', we see unceasing motion bring thoughts of eternity to the poet's mind, and by extension to our minds. The sea makes "a sound like thunder-everlastingly" allowing Wordsworth to contrast the sea's endless movement with the fleetingness of the present. Again, Wordsworth presents us with an opportunity to live a single moment with him and encourages us to capture "beautiful" moments of our own.

Elsewhere in his poetry, Wordsworth shows in no uncertain terms the consequences of failing to heed our surroundings and appreciate what we have. In both 'A slumber did my spirit seal' and 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways' Wordsworth deals with the theme of passing time in the context of the inevitability of death. These poems are two of Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poems and centre around an enigmatic figure whose loss Wordsworth is struggling to come to terms with. In 'A slumber did my spirit seal' Wordsworth describes Lucy as someone who seemed "a thing that could not feel the touch of earthly years". To me, this shows that Wordsworth took Lucy for granted while she was still alive, believing arrogantly, as we humans often do, that she was immune to the passing of time. This is something that Wordsworth deeply regrets as he must accept that "no motion has she now, no force; she neither hears nor sees", in other words, that she is dead and will never come back. This moment of acceptance that transience is inevitable and natural is important for Wordsworth and it is even more important that we, his modern readers, learn from his mistakes and appreciate what we have before it is too late.

Another angle on Wordsworth's experience of loss is communicated in 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways' and it is one which it is equally important that we as modern readers understand.

In this poem, Wordsworth speaks of Lucy as someone that “there were none to praise and very few to love” portraying her as someone who was criminally under appreciated in life. If we as modern readers take a long hard look at those around us, we will all find people close to us who are deserving of greater appreciation for the things they do. Wordsworth strongly regrets his under-appreciation of Lucy in life because it makes her death even harder on accept. Now, “she is in her grave, and, oh the difference to me”. These final lines are echoed by anyone who has experienced loss, be it material or human. It reminds me of Joni Mitchell’s modern lamentations on the loss of her public park (“don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone”) and shows a trend that can be spotted in so much of the world’s song and poetry. In this case Wordsworth’s elegy to someone he loved shows us we need to learn to appreciate those in our lives or else we risk repeating his mistakes again and again.

However, it is when Wordsworth is celebrating the rewards of presence, observance and perspective that he has the most to offer us. In poems such as ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’ Wordsworth puts a smile on our face with his boundless enthusiasm for the natural beauty that we can find all around us if we look hard enough. ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’ is a poem to be read on one’s commute or on the bus home from school, such is its ability to illuminate ordinary surroundings. Its use of monosyllables and the present tense create expectations in the reader which Wordsworth’s imagery spectacularly fulfills. The sight of London as he travels over Westminster bridge is one that “earth has not anything to show more fair”. It doesn’t matter that thousands of people see this sight everyday, or that Wordsworth himself was notoriously unfond of cities, to the poet, this is the most beautiful sight in all the world because there it is, in the present moment, before his very eyes “a sight so touching in its majesty”. Wordsworth feels this beauty in his very soul and by learning to recognise it, he enriches his everyday interactions with the world. In turn, through his poetry, so do we, regardless of the fact that we read it 218 years after it was written.

If you know where to look, Wordsworth’s poetry is a treasure trove of invaluable insights which offer the readers of today the opportunity to enhance our relationship with the world around us. In the reflective moments of ‘Skating’ and ‘It is a beautiful evening calm and free’ Wordsworth connects time, today’s rarest and most precious resource, with an awareness of the world around him to create a lesson in presence. In ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ and ‘She dwelt among the

untrodden ways' his capturing of moments and people lost in time serves to remind us of what we have and what we stand to lose by not heeding his reminder. And finally, in 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' it is with endearing and infectious enthusiasm that Wordsworth opens our eyes to the sights and sounds that surround us, a gift that we cannot underestimate. Swept up in the trials and tribulations of modern life, Wordsworth offers us a case for the importance of stepping back, enjoying the moment, and then letting go.