

# AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

The Prelude - *William Wordsworth*

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# THE PRELUDE

William Wordsworth

## Brief Summary

The extract explored during GCSE of The Prelude is actually from an epic poem comprising of fourteen books, of which the extract is produced from the first book “Introduction and school-time”, very close to the start.

The poem centres on Wordsworth’s childhood memory in the Lake District where he steals a boat and rows it into the middle of a lake. A mountain by the lake grows far bigger than he thought it. He realises the monumental nature of the mountain and hurries back to shore, claiming that the experience has changed how he sees nature.

## Synopsis

- Steals a boat and rows out onto the lake
- Watches ripples as he easily rows whilst focusing on a fixed point
- Starts to see the mountain grow bigger than he thought it was
- Realises the immensity of the mountain and of nature
- Scared and starts to row back to the shore
- Haunted by the event for days after
- Has changed how he views nature and how he views humanity

## Context

### William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850)

Wordsworth was born in Cumberland in the Lake District. He had a difficult childhood as he had a troubled relationship with his father and other relatives. Both his parents died during his adolescence and, as a result, he was split up from his siblings and sent to live with different relatives. He spent a lot of time avoiding his mother’s family, who treated him so badly he considered suicide. He developed a deep affection for the Lake District as he spent so much time outside to escape his problems.

Wordsworth was a **romantic poet**, which meant he was in favour of resisting growing industrialism by remembering a simpler, natural past. The changing shape of industrial Britain is likely the force that inspired him to explore his own moral and spiritual development through the medium of his

### Summary

**Context** – both parents died // lived with relatives (bad relationship) spend most time outside // Lake District // romantic poet (against industrial changes / monarchies / institutions) // look to beauty and simplicity of nature/past

**Structure** – single stanzas/enjambment (overwhelming) // cyclical structure (spiritual not physical journey) // parallelism (changed view) // allusions to John Milton

**Form** – 3 part autobiographical epic (The Recluse) // spiritual adventure to a poet

**Language** – loss of eloquence (overwhelmed redefine world) // personify nature (intent/controlled) // parenthesis // similes (share experience) // event take on mythical sense

**Key idea** – criticises the arrogance of human assumption of power when nature is superior // it is not nature that he is afraid of but the realisation of his own ignorance and insignificance (discover himself and role in world)



autobiographical epic poem 'The Prelude'. The poem also comes with a **message of warning to the contemporary society that was transforming fields to factories, woods to roads**.

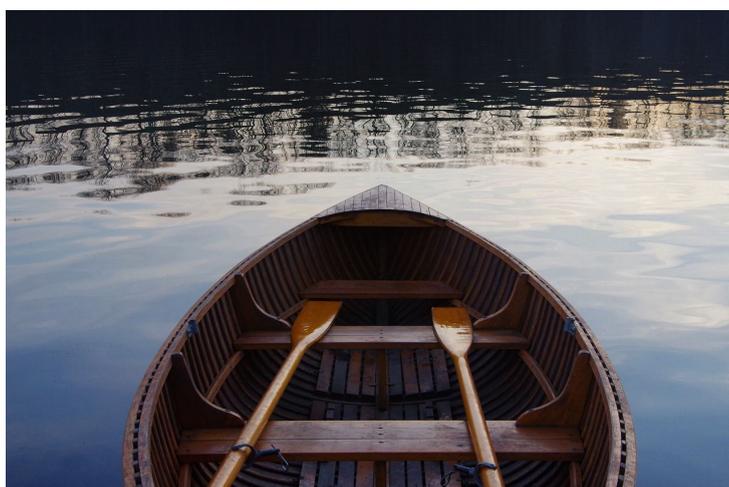
He was also an early supporter of the French revolution, like many romantic poets, who supported attempts to overthrow institutions. Their aim was to bring democracy and equality instead of monarchs and established religion to England. However, in general the romantic movement later lost support for the revolution when it turned violent, seeing it as evidence of humanity's innate evil.

The **poet's aim was to write a three part autobiographical epic** called "The Recluse", with The Prelude being the first volume of 400 pages. He wanted to present ideas from his past then explore their philosophical significance through the medium of nature and society, but sadly died before its completion.

### **Romantic Movement**

Romanticism stemmed from the **enlightenment period** which focused on objective science, logic and rationality.

- Writers at the time wanted to reject the cold unemotional rationalism of the enlightenment and instead use a more **emotional and subjective view** of the world.
- They looked to the **beauty of nature and past life** in order to **protest against the changing face of the world** which was happening due to industrialisation.



The romantic writers would also follow enlightened values of **protesting institutions and sources of power** (church / monarch / army), and use their work to **comment on society** and how it should be **reformed**.

- They tended to use **everyday language** to make poems accessible to all.
- The period can be considered a **reaction to the industrial revolution**, as writers often expressed their dislike of urban life.

As Wordsworth was a romantic poet, this means he wished to write literature which **challenged people's preconceptions and viewpoints** at the time.

### **Context of the Prelude**

**The Prelude was intended as the prologue to The Recluse**, designed to be a three part epic poem, which he died never finishing. The fact he never managed to finish this work, which he **wanted to rival Milton's Paradise Lost**, plagued him greatly according to letters.



### The Prelude

The main conflict explored in the poem is that of between nature and humans, or **man vs nature**, and is investigated through a young man's attempt to **control nature** through his stolen rowing boat.

- The piece is written in **iambic pentameter** to keep a constant rhythm which to contrast the revelatory events which occur to the young man in this section of the poem.

The poem is **based on Wordsworth's childhood**, during an event which happened in the Lake District, which brings a **tone of realism** to the piece. This is obviously a **formative event** in his life.

- The setting of the poem in a boat, on a journey, could metaphorically relate to the spiritual journey the speaker is taking in realising the true extent of nature. This introduces both the reader and speaker to the **theme of reflection**.



## Extract from, The Prelude

Wordsworth puts in a lot of description about how he steals the boat. Could be considered an attempt to romanticize, in order to defend his actions or mitigate their moral detriment.

Continues to refer to nature using the pronoun "her" which could suggest he views himself as equals with nature, which later becomes his downfall when he realizes the true power of nature.

he is a representation of humanity – humanity's pride in its importance and ability

Still fixed in a narrow field of vision, he viewed mankind as united with nature – working together with humanity as the dominant power, thus enabling him to manipulate water to his benefit and control his journey to a "chosen point".

One summer evening (**led by her**) I found

A little boat tied to a willow tree

Within a rocky cove, **its usual home.**

Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in

Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth

And **troubled pleasure**, nor without the voice

Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;

Leaving behind **her** still, on either side,

Small circles glittering idly in the moon,

Until they **melted all into one track**

Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,

**Proud of his skill**, to **reach a chosen point**

With an **unswerving line**, I fixed my view

Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,

The horizon's utmost boundary; far above

Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.

She was an elfin pinnace; lustily

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,

And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat

Went **heaving through the water** like a swan;

Can be considered an allusion to the idea of Mother Nature, and nature can be seen as female in that it is responsible for the feminine task of creating, sustaining and nurturing life – just as a mother does. By using personification, Wordsworth is able to contrast the role of nature to the role of a human – whilst women nurture a single child; nature nurtures an entire planet thus demonstrating its superior power.

Oxymoronic phrase shows he knows he has no right to be stealing the boat but feels entitled to enjoy nature, and arrogance of believing he was in control

Nature provides a comforting unity when the speaker tries to work with it.

thinks he controls where he is going despite being led by nature. Deceived into a sense of control, but nature chose the point as a destination where he would be humbled. This has the larger suggestion that it is only when mankind tries to work against nature that it becomes arduous and laborious



When, from behind that **craggy steep till then**

**The horizon's bound**, a huge peak, black and  
huge,

As if with voluntary power instinct,

**Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,**

And growing still in stature 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.** With trembling oars I turned,

And through the silent water **stole my way**

Back to the **covert of the willow tree;**

There in her mooring-place I left my bark, –

And through the meadows homeward went, in  
grave

And serious mood; but after I had seen

That spectacle, **for many days**, my brain

Worked with a dim and undetermined sense

Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts

**There hung a darkness**, call it **solitude**

**Or blank desertion.** No familiar shapes

Remained, no pleasant images of trees,

Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;

*The active verb "heaving" connotes sustained, intense physical effort. The illusion of control is broken as the mountain rises from the water, and nature's supremacy becomes apparent*

*Mountain seems to be living with intent – wanted to reveal itself. This phrase also suggests the reader can empathise with the speaker's fear and anxiety, and it juxtaposes to how nature was working with him at first, but now has turned against him.*

*Mirrors his actions earlier in the poem when he initially decides to steal the boat he uses to go and see the mountain - but he has now reversed roles with nature.*

*shows that Wordsworth keeps hiding what is being revealed to build tension and suspense and to heighten the reader's perception of it, so that they know it is important and significant*

*The true power of nature is now being revealed and the speaker is struggling to continue on his journey - nature has ultimate control.*

*Use of simile here could imply that the speaker is now choosing to personify nature but to above his level; as something other-worldly. The verb "strode" is very bold and implies a lot of strength, demonstrating the power of the mountain.*

*The speaker is showing a desire to return to somewhere he finds more familiar, perhaps suggesting how much the incident has frightened him.*

*This line suggests that the*



**But huge and mighty forms, that do not live**

**Like living men**, moved slowly through the mind

By day, and were a **trouble to my dreams.**

*He has realised his own ignorance, seemingly he is in the dark and has limited understanding of the extent and power of nature.*

*The speaker thinks he is in control – reaching his "chosen point" performing an "act of stealth", but really he is just following nature – controlled by greater force. Applying this to society, Wordsworth may be suggesting how mankind always thinks it is in control but it is always subject to nature ("huge and mighty forms that do not live like living men")*

*encounter and what he has seen now has irreversibly changed him and his mind - this reflects the immense power nature can have both society and an individual.*

*he is alone and has realised his insignificance in the face of nature*

*Nature transcends mankind and it is not bound by time or restrictions of life. Therefore, nature takes many forms to demonstrate its power and this phrase shows the long term impact nature has on him, this transformative effect could also be considered humbling but haunting.*



## The title “The Prelude”

The epic poem The Prelude was intended as the prologue to the planned three-part epic poem “The Recluse”, which he died never finishing, so the title basically reflects that this poem is an **introduction for a larger body or text / work**.

## Perspective

As the epic poem as a whole is **autobiographical**, the speaker can be assumed to be a fictionalised version of William Wordsworth himself. This means the poem reveals many personal details of his life. This is emphasised by the strong **first person narration** with the use of **past tense** which shows that the speaker is recalling events which are very clear to him and personally experienced.



Whilst the epic is written generally in **past tense**, Wordsworth also uses **many present participles** for description such as **“leaving”**, **“sparkling”** and **“glittering”**. Through **blurring past and present** Wordsworth shows the reader how this experience has shaped how he lives and how he still views the world in the present, as if he were to be experiencing it anew.

## Structure

### Epic Poem

The Prelude has been written as an **Epic Poem**. These are lengthy, **narrative poems** that often focused around a **heroic protagonist** and the legendary events they were involved in. They can be considered one of the first forms of poetry. They were typically written to incite a sense of awe in the reader as the narrative often focused on the heroism of the central character.

The Prelude can arguably be considered an Epic biography poem, and if it is autobiographical, then Wordsworth is its hero. However, **it can also be argued that the “hero” is not Wordsworth, but nature personified**. Some critics claim the poem’s focus on nature and mundane everyday life makes it seem underwhelming compared to most epics (e.g. Homer’s Odyssey), as a scared child is poor competition as a hero, and growing up is not really a heroic event.

However, it is possible Wordsworth intended the adventure to not be his physical actions but his **spiritual growth** and journey to becoming a poet, including his awakening to nature’s power and



his own insignificance, these providing the epic factor to the poem. If this is true, then The Prelude can be seen as an epic – if not literally – then at a metaphoric level.



### Stanza structure

The entire extract is a **single stanza** which emphasises the overwhelming power of nature. This is heightened because there are no breaks or pauses which **causes the reader to feel breathless**.

If the reader feels overwhelmed by the intensity of the poem, this could be to **reflect how Wordsworth was**

**overwhelmed by the immensity of the mountain** and nature. The readers can empathise with the speaker's sense of awe towards the **“huge peak”** as they are also faced with a huge piece of text that offers no breaks or pauses, causing the reader to feel overwhelmed just as the speaker does.

- This sensation increases as the stanza drags on, contributing to the building up of tension as the reader approaches the peak.
- This breathless pace is also intensified by frequent **enjambment** and **connectives** that prevent the reader from pausing, inciting a sense of vastness in the reader by making the poem feel endless and immense.

It is also possible the poem was structured in this way as an allusion to John Milton's “Paradise Lost” which is also written with very lengthy stanzas / iambic pentameter / epic poem. Wordsworth was known to have been greatly inspired by Milton's work, and he makes many references to him throughout The Prelude. “Paradise Lost” is about the biblical fall of man, and Wordsworth is providing a contemporary version of the fall of man as it tries to challenge nature.

### Parallelism

**PARALLELISM** | The use of grammatically identical / similar components repeated in a sentence or multiple sentences.

Wordsworth uses **parallelism** in his poem to contrast how the speaker was before and after the revelation of nature's power. This highlights how the experience has acted as a catalyst in his development.

Parallelisms are shown in the speaker's **rowing**:

- When the speaker is setting out on his journey his oar strokes **“melted all into one”**



**track**". This shows the speaker how easily he is able to move through the water in an **"unswerving line"**.

- However, his rowing becomes laboured after seeing the mountain and he starts **"heaving through the water"**. The **active verb "heaving"** connotes sustained, intense physical effort. Here, the speaker's illusion of control is broken as the mountain rises from the water, and nature's supremacy becomes apparent.
- The initial calm and relaxed rowing is contrasted with the frantic rowing back to shore which is reinforced by the repetition of **"struck"** in later lines.

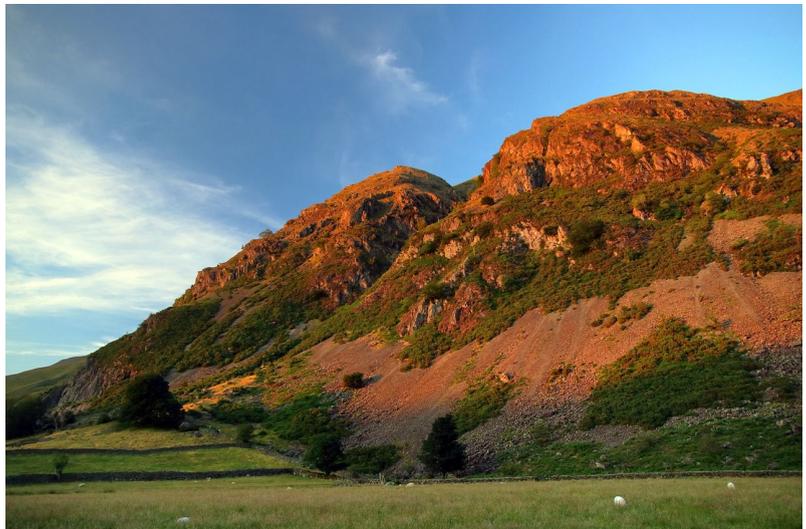
### Cyclical Structure

Wordsworth employs a **cyclical structure** in his poem to emphasise that the change that took place during the journey was **internal and psychological** rather than external and physical. It begins and ends in the mooring of the boat - his journey begins and finishes in the same place.

However, despite starting and finishing in the same place there are subtle changes which are shown through Wordsworth's use of a **linguistic echo**. When the speaker sets out in his stolen boat it is **"an act of stealth"** then when he returned home he **"stole my way back to the covert of the willow tree"**.

Here, the psychological change of the speaker is shown to the reader through the change from the speaker's **"stealth"** to him being afraid and **"stole"** away back to the land.

- At the beginning he stole the boat because he viewed himself as dominant and had no care for consequences whereas at the end he **"stole"** away because he feared the consequences of challenging nature's omnipotence.
- In the first instance, the stealing is literal and symbolic of the speaker's arrogance in feeling entitled to the use of the boat and to the enjoyment of nature.
- However, on his return, **"stole"** becomes indicative of his **humility** and his fear in the face of nature's true power. This fear causes him to retreat to what is safe and familiar.



### Enjambment

Wordsworth's use of this device makes the poem flow but also gives a sense of a **lack of control** from the lack of structure. This makes the poem feel like a **stream of consciousness**. The enjambement suggests an uncontrollable urge to convey the power of nature, hinting that he wants to try and express what he felt.



## Language

### Loss of Eloquence

As the poem progresses and the speaker becomes overwhelmed by the mountain the language becomes less sophisticated.

- At the start of the poem the language is poetic and descriptive, such as **“elfin pinnace”** and **“small circles glittering idly”**.
- However, the revelation of nature’s true power renders him literally speechless and his descriptions become more simplistic and clumsy. He repeats the adjective **“huge”** at the beginning and end of **“a huge peak, black and huge”** to **compensate for his devolved vocabulary**.
- Wordsworth’s description focuses on simple statements of size and colour. This shock at the limits of his world being redefined – the **“craggy ridge”** is no longer the **“horizon’s bound”** – is reflected by his inability to continue to define the world with his language.

### Repetition

The repetition of **“huge”** also emphasises the sheer size of the mountain. Perhaps Wordsworth couldn’t think of a comparison to how big the mountain is as it is incomparable.

- The **repetition** sounds like **stuttering**, which may suggest he nervous and intimidated in the face of such raw power.

### Personification of Nature

**PERSONIFICATION** | Describing a non-human object using human characteristics.

Wordsworth uses **personification** to describe nature. He opens the poem with reference to being **“(led by her)”** which shapes how the reader views the whole poem. His reference to nature as **“her”** or **“she”** is an **allusion** to the idea of Mother Nature, a common theme across mythology.

- Nature can be seen as female in that it is responsible for the **feminine task of creating, sustaining and nurturing life** – just as a mother does.
- By using personification, Wordsworth is able to contrast the role of nature to the role of a human – whilst women nurture a single child; nature nurtures an entire planet thus demonstrating its superior power.

Equally, nature’s power is demonstrated by the speaker being **“led by her”**, suggesting the speaker is not in control of his actions and in a way elevates blame from him for any negative actions.

**ALLUSION** | An indirect reference to a concept or theme without explicit mention.

Wordsworth references nature in **parenthesis [“(led by her)”]** suggesting it was added later. This implies he was unaware of this control until his moment of revelation when he realised nature’s



supremacy. The **parenthesis** also works to imply that nature was in control of the revelation of the peak, revealing itself to him with the intention to humble him.

### Similes

Wordsworth uses **similes** in order to try and help his readers understand his experience, for example through the phrases **“like a swan”**, **“like a living thing”** and **“like one who rows”**. It seems the speaker wants to share the knowledge he has gained, specifically his knowledge of nature’s power, in order to warn humanity against engaging in and supporting the industrial revolution.

### Semantic Fields

The poet employs a range of thematically focused, semantic fields, namely of **nature, power and pride** to create an **emotive atmosphere** and setting for his piece of work.

### Mythology

By romanticising his memory of the event (his revelation of nature's power), it suggests that it had such a big influence on him that it has caused him to remember it as mythical and magical. His **“little boat”** is transformed into an **“elfin pinnacle”** – felt like he was undertaking a very significant journey and event, and that it was his spiritual journey of self discovery. The boat is his means of achieving this and it takes on a **mythical quality** in the poem.



### **Nature**

Wordsworth uses the **motif of the mountain** to portray the underestimation of nature’s power. The speaker can be seen as symbolic of humanity as a whole. The speaker believed **“the summit of a craggy peak”** to be the extent of his world, and the extent of nature’s power over his world.

- The **definitive statement** that this is **“the horizon’s utmost boundary”** shows humanity’s misplaced confidence and false sense of superiority over nature.
- When the true size of the mountain is revealed to be a **“huge peak, black and huge”** it is not the mountain itself that scares him, but rather the implications of his judgement of the world being deeply flawed.
- He is intimidated not by the physical size of the mountain, but by the **existential realisation of his own insignificance**; the confidence in nature’s inferiority was a dangerous misconception.

This ties in with a theme of **humanity’s evil** also seen in John Milton’s **“Paradise Lost”**, as Wordsworth is showing how humanity’s innate **hubris** (confidence/pride) leads to ignorance and subsequent offences against the forces they underestimate.

The themes of pride in the poem are comparable to that in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and additionally both these poems are written in iambic pentameter, as epic poems with lengthy stanzas. Milton is presenting a type of fall from grace, which is the inevitable fall that comes with hubris.



## Power

The speaker's ignorance of the power of nature is manifested in the **"darkness"** and lack of colour as the speaker has realised that he has been living metaphorically in the dark, so is naïve and unaware of his own insignificance.

## Comparisons

The Prelude	Kamikaze
Man vs Nature	Patriotism vs Nature
Both speakers are forced to reconsider their perspective on nature.	
Celebrates / recognises the power and influence of nature	

### The Prelude & Ozymandias

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both poems display nature as more powerful than mankind; in Ozymandias, human power is shown as intrinsically weak and transient and lost to time and nature. Meanwhile, in The Prelude, failed attempts of mankind to overpower and manipulate a force beyond its control are displayed.</li> <li>The theme of pride is key in both, it being the cause of the speaker's eventual fall. They <b>both link to Milton's Paradise Lost</b> in this sense of the 'fall of man' and also to epic poetry in general. This links to the irony of statue in desert in the poem Ozymandias.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whilst both poets explore how pride is unfounded because human power is inferior to the power of nature, they present this in different ways. In The Prelude, the overwhelming power of nature leads to the speaker's loss of eloquence and how he becomes unable to define his world. On the other hand, in Ozymandias, this power is conveyed through the <b>symbolism</b> of the desert and time.</li> </ul>

### The Prelude & Storm On The Island

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both poems show nature as powerful - in SOTI, it is due to violence of nature – military metaphors - and in The Prelude, it is due to size and extent of nature, for example <b>"huge peak"</b>.</li> <li>The speakers in both discover truths about the world through their encounters with nature. In SOTI, the islanders realise inability to control the storm, displayed through the poem's cyclical content and narrative as the islanders always end up afraid. It could also potentially be about the Northern Ireland conflict. On the other hand, in The Prelude, there is spiritual development of a poet explored, as the speaker realises their own</li> </ul>
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	insignificance.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The conflict with nature is displayed differently in each poem - in SOTI it is physical, as if they are being attacked by nature, whereas in The Prelude it is psychological – nature is inciting fear and redefining their view of the world.</li></ul>

