



WORDSWORTH'S GREEN VISION: LANDSCAPE, MEMORY, AND ECO-LOGICAL SELF IN TINTERN ABBEY AND THE PRELUDE

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Abstract

This paper offers an ecocritical reading of William Wordsworth's poetry, arguing that his representation of landscape is not merely decorative or sentimental but ethically and psychologically formative. Through close readings of "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" and selected passages from *The Prelude*, the study examines how Wordsworth constructs a "green vision" where nature becomes a living presence shaping memory, perception, and moral sensibility. The paper further contends that Wordsworth anticipates central ecocritical concerns: ecological interdependence, the critique of industrial modernity, and the formation of an ecological self grounded in reciprocal relationships with the non-human world. While Romantic poetry is sometimes dismissed as idealizing nature, Wordsworth's poetry demonstrates a complex awareness of environmental loss, human alienation, and the necessity of sustaining attentiveness toward the natural world. A supporting reading of "The World Is Too Much with Us" highlights Words-

worth's critique of material culture and ecological estrangement. The paper concludes that Wordsworth's poetic imagination serves as an early prologue to ecocriticism by presenting nature as a site of ecological consciousness, ethical renewal, and human-nonhuman communion.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Romanticism, Landscape, Memory, Ecological Self, Tintern Abbey, The Prelude

1.1 Introduction

The rise of ecocriticism in late twentieth-century literary studies transformed the ways scholars approached the relationship between literature and the environment. Instead of treating nature as a mere background for human drama, ecocriticism insists that the natural world is an active presence in texts, shaping human experience, cultural values, and ethical imagination. Although ecocriticism is a modern theoretical movement, its intellectual roots can be traced to earlier literary traditions, particularly Romantic poetry. Among Romantic poets, William Wordsworth remains one of the most significant writers whose poetry not only represents nature but also frames it as a moral, psychological, and spiritual force.

Wordsworth's work emerges during a period of profound historical transformation. The Industrial Revolution reshaped landscapes, economies, and human relationships to land. Urbanization and the spread of capitalist modernity intensified the division between human life and the non-human world. Wordsworth's poetry repeatedly registers this change, sometimes explicitly and sometimes indirectly, by contrasting the restorative presence of natural landscapes with the alienation produced by modern life. His representation of nature is not a simple retreat into pas-

toral fantasy; rather, it becomes a sustained meditation on what it means to live responsibly and attentively within a larger ecological order.

This paper argues that Wordsworth's poetry functions as a prologue to ecocriticism because it anticipates three key ecocritical concerns. First, Wordsworth constructs landscape as a dynamic participant in human life, shaping perception and memory. Second, his poetry critiques the modern commodification of nature and the spiritual consequences of ecological estrangement. Third, Wordsworth's writing develops what contemporary ecocriticism calls the "ecological self"—a form of subjectivity rooted in interdependence rather than domination. Through close readings of "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798) and selected episodes from *The Prelude* (1805/1850), along with supporting references to "The World Is Too Much with Us" (1807), this study demonstrates how Wordsworth's "green vision" articulates an ethical and ecological imagination that continues to speak powerfully to contemporary environmental thought.

1.2 Ecocriticism and the Romantic Imagination

Ecocriticism, broadly defined, is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Cheryll Glotfelty's influential formulation describes ecocriticism as an earth-centered approach to literary studies, comparable in scope to feminist criticism or Marxist criticism in its emphasis on a particular set of relationships—those between human culture and the natural world (Glotfelty xviii). Ecocritical inquiry asks how texts represent nature, how they construct human-nonhuman relations, and how literature participates in environmental consciousness. Lawrence Buell similarly emphasizes that environmental literature makes the environment not just a setting but a presence with ethical significance, challenging anthropocentric assumptions (Buell 7).

Wordsworth's poetry has often been read through aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological frameworks: the sublime, the beautiful, pantheism, imagination, memory, and the growth of the mind. Yet ecocriticism offers an especially relevant lens because Wordsworth's central subject is not simply "nature" as scenery but the shaping of human consciousness through sustained engagement with the natural world. Greg Garrard identifies Romanticism as a crucial historical moment in environmental thinking, partly because it foregrounds emotional and spiritual bonds with landscape while also expressing anxiety about industrial modernity (Garrard 37). Wordsworth's work, in this sense, stands at the threshold between pre-industrial rural life and modern ecological crisis.

However, one must also recognize the limitations of Romantic nature writing. Critics sometimes argue that Romantic poetry idealizes nature as pure, harmonious, and morally superior, ignoring the material realities of ecological systems or social injustice. Yet Wordsworth's writing complicates such accusations. His poetry repeatedly acknowledges loss, change, and human vulnerability. The landscape in his poems is not always comforting; it can be overwhelming, mysterious, and even frightening. Furthermore, Wordsworth's emphasis on memory and time suggests that nature is not static but subject to transformation—both natural and human-induced. His ecological imagination is therefore not simply a celebration of "green" beauty but a serious exploration of how humans belong to and depend upon the non-human world.

Wordsworth's importance to ecocriticism lies in his ability to articulate an early environmental ethics grounded in attentiveness, humility, and reciprocity. Rather than presenting nature as an object for consumption, he invites readers to perceive the natural world as a living presence that

participates in the formation of selfhood. In this way, Wordsworth's poetry anticipates what deep ecology later formulates: the idea that human identity is expanded through identification with the more-than-human world. Even without the vocabulary of ecology, Wordsworth's writing imagines human life as embedded within a larger system of relations.

1.3 Landscape as Living Presence in "Tintern Abbey"

"Tintern Abbey" is one of Wordsworth's most frequently studied poems, often interpreted as a meditation on memory, imagination, and spiritual growth. Yet from an ecocritical perspective, the poem also becomes a foundational text of environmental consciousness. Wordsworth does not treat the Wye Valley landscape as a passive background; rather, it is an active presence shaping his mind and moral sensibility. The poem begins with the return of the speaker after five years, emphasizing time and change: the landscape is familiar yet renewed, and the speaker's relationship to it has evolved.

The opening description establishes the landscape as richly textured and alive. The "steep and lofty cliffs," "plots of cottage-ground," "wreaths of smoke," and "hedge-rows" are not presented as isolated objects but as interconnected elements within a living environment (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 5-17). The smoke rising from cottages suggests human habitation integrated into the natural world rather than dominating it. The poem's pastoral imagery thus conveys a model of coexistence, where human life is part of the landscape's ecology. Wordsworth's attention to detail signals an ethic of perception: to see nature closely is already to resist the abstraction and commodification of modern life.

The poem's central argument emerges in its exploration of memory. During his absence from the landscape, the speaker has carried "sensations sweet" in his mind, which have offered "tranquil restoration" in moments of weariness (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 27–30). Nature here functions as a psychological resource, but it is not reduced to a therapeutic tool. Wordsworth insists that these memories have shaped his moral being: they have influenced "acts / Of kindness and of love" (35–36). This is a striking moment because it links ecological experience with ethical action. The natural world becomes a teacher of empathy, and the speaker's relationship to landscape becomes inseparable from his relationship to other humans.

Ecocriticism often critiques anthropocentrism, the assumption that nature exists primarily for human use. At first glance, Wordsworth's emphasis on nature's benefit to the human mind might appear anthropocentric. Yet the poem complicates this reading by portraying nature as a presence with agency and mystery. Wordsworth speaks of a "motion and a spirit" that "rolls through all things" (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 100–02). This passage has been interpreted as pantheistic or spiritual, but ecocritically it suggests an early awareness of interconnectedness. Nature is not a set of objects; it is a dynamic system of life. The speaker's mind is not separate from this system but participates in it.

Furthermore, Wordsworth acknowledges that his relationship with nature has changed. In youth, he experienced nature through "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 84–85). This intense, almost possessive passion resembles what ecocritics might call an aesthetic consumption of nature. Yet the mature speaker moves beyond this stage. He now hears in nature "the still, sad music of humanity" (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 91). This line is crucial

because it demonstrates that nature is not an escape from human suffering but a context in which human vulnerability becomes visible. The phrase “music of humanity” suggests that human life and natural life are intertwined. The landscape becomes a medium through which the speaker recognizes the complexity of existence.

Wordsworth’s mature vision is grounded in what he calls “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey” 95–96). This “something” is not fully defined; it is experienced rather than conceptualized. Ecocriticism values such moments because they challenge the instrumental logic of modernity. Instead of mastering nature through knowledge and control, Wordsworth proposes a form of humility and receptivity. The poem models an ecological consciousness in which the human self is porous and responsive to the more-than-human world.

The concluding address to Dorothy Wordsworth reinforces this ecological ethic. The speaker hopes that Dorothy will also experience nature’s “healing thoughts” and moral influence (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey” 142). Importantly, he imagines her future memories of the landscape sustaining her when he is gone. Nature becomes a shared inheritance, not a private possession. The poem thus constructs landscape as both personal and communal, shaping relationships across time. In an era of environmental crisis, this idea of nature as inheritance resonates strongly: the landscapes we love must be preserved not only for ourselves but for those who come after.

1.4 Memory, Time, and Environmental Consciousness

Wordsworth's use of memory is central to his ecological imagination. In ecocritical terms, memory becomes a way of resisting environmental loss. Modern industrial society often treats land as interchangeable and disposable. Wordsworth, by contrast, treats particular places as irreplaceable, embedded in personal and cultural identity. His poetry suggests that environmental degradation is not merely physical but psychological and ethical: to lose a landscape is to lose a part of oneself.

In "Tintern Abbey," memory operates in two ways. First, it preserves the landscape within the mind, offering comfort in moments of alienation. Second, it transforms the speaker's relationship with nature, enabling deeper understanding. Memory thus becomes a form of ecological continuity. Even when physically absent, the speaker remains connected to the natural world. This connection challenges the modern separation between human consciousness and the environment.

The poem also emphasizes the passage of time. The speaker's return after five years signals that landscapes and selves change together. This is an important ecological insight: nature is not static, and neither is human perception. Ecocriticism often stresses the temporality of environmental processes—seasonal cycles, ecological succession, climate change. Wordsworth's poetry, though not scientific, shares this sensitivity to time. The Wye Valley is not a fixed scene; it is a living system experienced differently across life stages.

Moreover, Wordsworth's emphasis on time invites a reflection on environmental responsibility. If landscapes change, and if human actions contribute to that change, then the way humans live within nature matters profoundly. Wordsworth does not explicitly address pollution or deforestation, but his poetry cultivates an attitude of care. The poem's quiet reverence for the Wye Valley

contrasts with the destructive tendencies of industrial modernity. In this sense, Wordsworth's memory-based poetics can be read as an early form of environmental preservation.

1.5 The Ecological Self in *The Prelude*

While "Tintern Abbey" presents a concentrated meditation on nature's moral influence, *The Prelude* offers a broader narrative of the growth of the poet's mind through encounters with landscape. As an autobiographical epic, *The Prelude* explores how the self is formed not in isolation but through relationships—with family, society, and crucially, with the natural world. Ecocriticism finds in *The Prelude* an early articulation of the ecological self: a subjectivity shaped by the non-human environment.

In Book One, Wordsworth describes his childhood experiences in the Lake District, emphasizing his freedom to roam and his intimate engagement with natural surroundings. These episodes portray nature as both nurturing and disciplinary. The famous boat-stealing episode illustrates this duality. The young boy rows across the lake, initially exhilarated by the sense of power and control. Yet the appearance of a "huge peak, black and huge" rising behind him produces fear and humility (Wordsworth, *Prelude* 1.377). The landscape asserts its presence, reminding the boy of his smallness. This is a crucial ecological moment: the natural world is not an object to be possessed but a force that exceeds human will.

Ecocritics often discuss the need to move beyond the illusion of human mastery. The boat episode dramatizes this lesson. The boy's attempt to dominate nature is interrupted by nature's sublime power. The resulting fear is not merely psychological; it is ethical. The boy learns that he is part of

a larger world that cannot be controlled. This experience shapes his later imagination, as the memory of the peak continues to haunt him. In ecocritical terms, this haunting suggests that ecological awareness is formed through encounters that disrupt anthropocentrism.

Similarly, Wordsworth's descriptions of skating on frozen lakes, climbing hills, and wandering through woods reveal a childhood intimacy with natural processes. Nature is not separate from play; it is the medium of life. The poet's mind grows through sensory engagement with wind, water, snow, and stone. This emphasis on embodied experience aligns with ecocriticism's critique of modern abstraction. Industrial modernity often disconnects people from the material world, replacing direct contact with mediated experience. Wordsworth's childhood scenes offer an alternative model of ecological belonging.

Yet *The Prelude* is not merely nostalgic. It also registers the pressures of modern society. In Book Seven, Wordsworth describes London as a place of sensory overload, commercial spectacle, and alienation. The city represents a break from natural rhythms. While Wordsworth does not condemn urban life entirely, he portrays it as a space where human perception is distorted by consumption and crowding. This contrast between the Lake District and London anticipates ecocritical critiques of modernity: the more human society becomes dominated by commerce and artificiality, the more it loses its connection to ecological reality.

Wordsworth's return to nature after London is not a simple escape but a restoration of balance. Nature in *The Prelude* functions as a grounding force, enabling the poet to recover clarity and mor-

al orientation. The ecological self, in this sense, is not formed once and for all but requires continual renewal through engagement with the natural world.

1.6 Industrial Modernity and Ecological Estrangement

Wordsworth's poetry repeatedly expresses anxiety about modern life's separation from nature. This theme becomes explicit in "The World Is Too Much with Us," a sonnet that critiques materialism and ecological estrangement. The poem begins with a lament: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers" (Wordsworth, "World" 1-2). The phrase "getting and spending" captures the capitalist logic of consumption, while "lay waste" suggests both spiritual and environmental destruction. The sonnet thus links economic modernity with ecological damage.

Wordsworth's critique is not only social but ecological. He argues that modern people have "given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (Wordsworth, "World" 4). The loss here is not merely moral but relational: humans have severed their bond with the natural world. The poem's imagery of the sea, the winds, and the moon suggests that nature continues its rhythms, but humans no longer feel connected to them. This disconnection is a central concern of ecocriticism, which often emphasizes that environmental crisis is rooted in cultural attitudes and values as much as in technological practices.

The sonnet's turn to pagan mythology—preferring to be "a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" (Wordsworth, "World" 9)—may seem surprising. Yet ecocritically, it reflects a desire for a worldview in which nature is sacred and alive. Wordsworth imagines seeing Proteus and Triton,

figures associated with the sea. The point is not literal belief but imaginative reconnection. Modern Christianity, in Wordsworth's view, has not effectively preserved a sense of nature's divinity. The poem thus suggests that ecological renewal may require cultural and imaginative transformation.

In *The Prelude*, this critique is extended through Wordsworth's reflections on the French Revolution and its aftermath. The political turmoil and disillusionment contribute to a crisis of faith in human progress. Wordsworth's return to nature becomes a response not only to personal distress but to historical upheaval. Nature offers a different kind of continuity, one not based on human ideologies but on enduring ecological rhythms. This does not mean nature is timeless or unchanging; rather, it offers a perspective beyond the volatility of human affairs.

Ecocriticism often warns against romanticizing nature as a refuge from politics. Yet Wordsworth's poetry suggests that ecological consciousness is inseparable from ethical and political awareness. The exploitation of nature and the exploitation of humans often occur together. Industrial capitalism transforms both land and labor into commodities. Wordsworth's sympathy for rural life, his attention to cottages, shepherds, and small communities, implies a critique of social and ecological disruption. Though Wordsworth's politics are complex and sometimes conservative, his poetry preserves an awareness that modernity's progress has costs—costs paid by both people and landscapes.

1.7 Reciprocity and Environmental Ethics

One of the most eco-critically significant aspects of Wordsworth's poetry is its emphasis on reciprocity. The relationship between humans and nature is not one-directional. Nature shapes hu-

man minds, but humans also have responsibilities toward nature. Wordsworth does not articulate environmental policy, but he cultivates an ethical attitude grounded in attentiveness, humility, and gratitude.

In "Tintern Abbey," the speaker acknowledges that nature has been his "anchor" and "guardian" (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 109–10). Such language suggests dependence. The human self is not autonomous; it is sustained by the natural world. This challenges the Enlightenment ideal of the independent rational subject. Wordsworth's subject is relational, shaped by external forces and experiences. Eco-criticism values this relativity because it counters the ideology of domination that underlies environmental exploitation.

Similarly, *The Prelude* portrays nature as both teacher and companion. The poet's growth depends on encounters with rivers, mountains, storms, and quiet fields. These encounters are not merely aesthetic; they are formative. The poet learns restraint, wonder, and empathy. In ecocritical terms, this education fosters an ecological ethics: to recognize the more-than-human world as meaningful is to treat it with respect.

Wordsworth's poetry also emphasizes the role of imagination. The ecological self is not formed only through sensory experience but through imaginative interpretation. The mind does not passively receive nature; it engages with it creatively. This interaction is central to Romanticism, but it also has ecocritical implications. Environmental consciousness requires imagination because ecological systems are complex and often invisible. One cannot directly perceive climate change or biodiversity loss in a single moment; one must imagine connections across time and space.

Wordsworth's poetry trains readers in such imaginative perception, encouraging them to see nature as interconnected and alive.

Yet Wordsworth's imagination does not distort nature into a purely subjective projection. He repeatedly emphasizes that nature has its own reality. The "huge peak" in the boat episode is not a symbol invented by the mind; it is an external presence that imposes itself upon the boy's consciousness. This balance between imagination and reality is crucial. Ecocriticism often critiques texts that reduce nature to metaphor. Wordsworth's poetry, while deeply symbolic, resists this reduction by insisting on nature's material presence.

1.8 Wordsworth as a Prologue to Ecocriticism

To claim that Wordsworth is a prologue to ecocriticism is not to suggest that he anticipated modern ecological science. Rather, it is to argue that his poetry cultivates the attitudes and values that ecocriticism later theorizes: attentiveness to place, recognition of interdependence, critique of modern alienation, and ethical respect for the non-human world.

Wordsworth's "green vision" is grounded in the particularity of landscapes. The Wye Valley, the Lake District, and other rural settings are not generic nature scenes but specific places with history and meaning. Ecocriticism emphasizes place-based thinking because environmental problems are always local as well as global. Wordsworth's poetry demonstrates how attachment to place can shape identity and moral imagination.

Furthermore, Wordsworth's emphasis on memory suggests that ecological consciousness is temporal. Landscapes are not merely present; they are carried into the future through memory and imagination. This is important in the context of environmental crisis, where the loss of landscapes is often experienced as a form of cultural and psychological trauma. Wordsworth's poetry offers a language for this loss, as well as a model for sustaining connection through remembrance.

Wordsworth also critiques the modern world's "getting and spending," anticipating ecocritical critiques of consumer culture. His poetry suggests that materialism produces not only social inequality but ecological estrangement. The loss of connection to natural rhythms results in spiritual impoverishment. In this sense, Wordsworth's environmental ethics is inseparable from his moral philosophy.

Finally, Wordsworth's poetry constructs an ecological self: a self that recognizes its dependence on and kinship with the more-than-human world. This self is not defined by domination but by reciprocity. Ecocriticism often seeks to reimagine human identity beyond anthropocentrism, and Wordsworth's poetry provides an early literary model of such reimagining.

1.9 Conclusion

Wordsworth's poetry remains deeply relevant to contemporary ecocritical thought because it offers a sustained exploration of the relationship between landscape and selfhood. In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth presents nature as a living presence that shapes memory, moral sensibility, and spiritual awareness. The poem's emphasis on interconnectedness and ethical renewal anticipates ecocriticism's concern with ecological interdependence. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth narrates the

formation of the ecological self through embodied encounters with nature, moments of humility before the sublime, and the contrast between rural landscapes and urban modernity. The supporting sonnet “The World Is Too Much with Us” articulates a critique of consumer culture and ecological estrangement that resonates strongly in the present era.

Wordsworth’s “green vision” is not simply a Romantic idealization of nature. It acknowledges change, loss, and human vulnerability. It also insists that nature is not merely scenery but a participant in human life, shaping perception and ethics. While modern ecocriticism brings scientific and political urgency to environmental questions, Wordsworth provides an imaginative foundation: a poetic language of attentiveness, humility, and reciprocity. His work invites readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world and to recognize that ecological consciousness is inseparable from moral and psychological well-being. In this way, Wordsworth’s poetry functions as an enduring prologue to ecocriticism, offering both critique and hope in an age of environmental crisis.

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