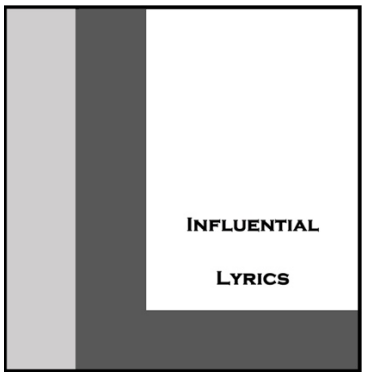

Series 1, Number 10

William Wordsworth
1770 -1850

The World is too much with Us

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

PODCAST (Search "Influential Lyrics" on Apple or Spotify to listen and subscribe!)

Topics & Terms

- Romanticism
- Nature Writing

Lines to remember...

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
> Little we see in Nature that is ours…

Podcast Script

William Wordsworth, "The World is too much with us"

William Wordsworth (1770-1850), one of the central figures of British Romantic literature, is widely known as a nature poet. He is one of the first writers to develop a sophisticated exploration of the relationship between the natural world and the psychological, perhaps even spiritual flourishing of human beings. This poem in particular is one of Wordsworth's most widely known sonnets, but I've included it here in *Influential Lyrics* for a particular reason: this poem, together with a lyric called "I wandered lonely as a cloud" which we'll consider in the next episode, will help illustrate a sea-change in much of Western culture that happened in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and that was a driving force of Romantic period poetry in English and that still echoes through economic, political, and environmental thinking in the 21st century. More about this later…. For now, let's have a listen to Wordsworth's poem. Here is William Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us":

[poem]

So what are we to make of this one? Well, I think it will be helpful to begin at the macro level before we dive into the particular images and references. As is typical of the sonnet form, this poem begins by expressing and developing a significant problem, and then—after a "turn" (or "volta")—the poet offers some potential resolution to that problem. In Wordsworth's poem the "problem" part is set up in the opening line: "The world is too much with us." As the idea develops, it looks like the

"world" the speaker is refering to has to do with materialist, capitalist culture: we spend so much time and energy "getting and spending" that we can no longer respond to the beauty of the natural world. Then, after the turn—that's the "Great God!" interjection in the middle of line nine—the poem doesn't so much offer a resolution to the problem as an impossible desire to return to some former condition when people were not so alienated from the natural world.

Now that we have the problem/resolution structure in mind, let's go back and consider some of the specific imagery and phrasing. As I just noted, the poem begins with a somewhat oblique reference to a materialist/capitalist culture—that is, the "world" of the opening line. The full opening quatrain goes like this:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

The implicit claim here is that we are overly concerned with time (we worry about being too late or too soon) and we are certainly concerned about money and things. Wordsworth condenses this central motivation of an emergent capitalist economy as a process of "getting and spending." One way to think about this: let's say you are listening to this podcast while you're commuting to work or to school. So much of your energy is wrapped up in *when* you get to wherever it is you're going—"late and soon"—and *why* you're going in the first place (presumably to get something like a salary, a college degree, whatever) that you can spend in some imaginary future. To my mind, Wordsworth's poem really nails that aspect of contemporary life that we tend to just take for granted. Trouble is, we are so caught up in this world that we "lay waste our powers." The full fruition of our humanity hinges on seeing something "in Nature that is ours," but, in acquiescing to the materialist motivation of "getting and spending," we have inadvertently "given our hearts away." What we get in exchange is a "sordid boon." This last phrase could use some further explication. A "boon" is typically a good thing—some favor or benefit to us, but in the present case, this turns out to be a "sordid" boon—something that is smutty and degrading. To paraphrase the whole quatrain then, we get something like this: Our preoccupation with "getting and spending" in a materialist culture may seem like a great benefit to us (that is, a "boon") but actually we've had to degrade our selves—even "give our hearts away"—in order to earn this "sordid boon."

The next quatrain, rather paradoxically, presents us with some natural images—images to which we can no longer respond. Here's the quatrain (plus a bit of the following line):

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

The natural imagery here is striking. "The sea that bares her bosom to the moon" is a good example—think of a night-time view of the sea with the moon reflected in the surface. The line conjurs up a lovely picture, but note too the rather sexy personification of the sea that "bares her bosom." The next two lines describe the winds which, on the one hand, can be "howling at all hours" but that now are "up-gathered … like sleeping flowers." It seems almost contradictory, but the one image combines a sense of power or even violence with the quiet sort of suspended energy of "sleeping flowers." In any event, the speaker claims that "we are out of tune" for appreciating such images—whatever we happen to see in nature, "It moves us not."

And this takes us to one of the most decisive "turns" in all English sonnets: "Great God!" says the speaker in the middle of line 9.

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

A quick explication: the speaker is standing on a "pleasant lea" (that is, a pleasant vantage point from which to view the surrounding natural world), but he is feeling "forlorn," alienated, lacking any "glimpses" that might offer some more profound connection to nature. And, he speculates that it would be better to be "A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn." To paraphrase, some ancient animist religion (i.e. a "creed outworn") would at least offer the more vital connection to nature that he longs for.

So what would this "creed outworn" have that the speaker currently lacks? Well, one way to think about this is to borrow a famous concept from the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber. I'll need to oversimplify a bit, but the core idea is this: As we make our way through the world, we have two kinds of relationships: I-Thou relationships and I-It relationships. The I-It relationship is how we deal with material objects; the I-Thou relationship is how we deal with other people and (perhaps) other sentient beings as well. For example, if I am clumsy while walking through a grocery store and I bump

into a display shelf, I don't feel like I've been rude and I need to apologize to the shelf. The shelf is just a thing—the It in an I-It relationship. If, however, I accidentally ram my shopping cart into another shopper, I'm quick to apologize and do my best to make up for my clumsy action. I implicitly acknowledge that the other shopper is a person with her own identity, and feelings, and selfhood—she is the Thou in an I-Thou relationship—and we together work to establish some sort of reciprocal understanding. We make eye contact, I apologize, she says something like "Oh, it's nothing, no problem," I apologize once again, and we go about our shopping… etc. The point is that there has been a genuine interchange. While the accident itself may be regrettable, it nonetheless leads to a reciprocal exchange through which we both enact and reaffirm our fundamental humanity.

Wordsworth's speaker is apparently longing for this sort of affirmative, I-Thou relationship with nature, and this point is underscored by the last two lines of the sonnet. The speaker wishes that he might

> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Proteus and Triton are both sea gods from classical Greek mythology—Proteus the shape-shifter is associated with change, transformation, and an ability to see into the future; Triton is a messenger/herald figure who is often depicted trumpeting with a conch shell (hence Wordsworth's "wreathed horn"). There is some considerable speculation in the critical literature about why Wordsworth selected these two gods, but here I'll sidestep that issue to emphasize that these gods—like many of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology—are *personifications* of natural phenomena. As such, they enable the viewer to see such phenomena not as simply the material nature of an I-It relationship but rather as a sentient entity with whom one might engage in an I-Thou relationship. The speaker realizes, of course, that Proteus and Triton no longer exist—they are elements of a Pagan "creed outworn"—but they nevertheless exemplify the possibility of a more dynamic and interactive relationship with nature, one that is vanishing in the world of getting and spending that is "too much with us."

At this point, we should have a pretty firm grasp on the basic meaning of Wordsworth's poem. It is of course significant that the poem was written in the early 19th century—while England was in the midst of the industrial revolution. The whole nation was rapidly being transformed from an agrarian to an industrial state, a process that was super-charged by Britain's status as the dominant global economic power. This economic transformation provided all sorts of opportunities for "getting and spending," but the sonnet points to what is lost in this period of rapid "progress." That said, it would be too simple to see the poem as merely a condemnation of an increasingly capitalist/materialist

culture and a nostalgic celebration of an agrarian life more attuned to the natural world. Such an interpretation is possible, of course, but it tends to overlook the problem of agency. Recall that line in the first quatrain that "We have given our hearts away." "We" are the ones who are making this happen. "We" are the ones who, in our haste to be "getting and spending," end up sacrificing a connection to the natural world that—as we'll see in the next episode of *Influential Lyrics*—is fundamental to the full dignity and flourishing of the human spirit.

For now, though, let me just thank you for listening—and thanks especially for subscribing!—and I'll look forward to exploring more of Wordsworth's environmental philosophy in the next episode of *Influential Lyrics*. As always, I'll welcome any comments or suggestions you would care to send my way, and I'll append another reading of the poem after the closing music. See you next time on *Influential Lyrics*!

Further Reading

Bate, Jonathan. *Radical Wordsworth: The Poet Who Changed the World*. Yale University Press, 2020. [A condensed and introductory biography, very accessible and readable for beginners.]

Gill, Stephen. *William Wordsworth: A Life*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2020. [A superb and detailed account of Wordsworth's life.]

Kroeber, Karl. "A New Reading of 'The World Is Too Much with Us.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1963, pages 183–88. < https://doi-org.uab.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/25599587 >. [An early, quite accessible interpretation that complicates the more sentimental or nostalgic reading.]

Ma, Tianyu. "Boons, Authority, and Imagination: A Reading of 'The World Is Too Much with Us.'" *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2018, pages 82-87. < https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2017.1385377 >. [Argument based on etymology of "boon"; sees the poem as highlighting not so much a critique of materialism as a failure of imagination.]

ETC....

Influential Lyrics podcast, 1.10, May 2026

Podcast Citation (MLA 9th edition):

Grimes, Kyle. "William Wordsworth, 'The world is too much with us." *Influential Lyrics*, written and presented by Kyle Grimes, episode 1.10. May, 2026 < influentiallyrics.com >.