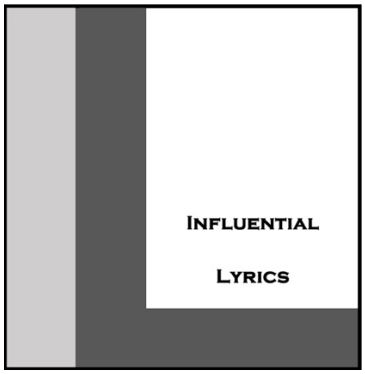

Series 1, Number 11

William Wordsworth
1770-1850

I wandered lonely as a cloud

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils

PODCAST (search for *Influential Lyrics* on Apple podcasts, Spotify, etc. to listen and subscribe)

Topics & Terms

- Romanticism
- Nature Writing

Lines to remember...

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils

Podcast Script

William Wordsworth, "I wandered lonely as a cloud"

In the previous episode of *Influential Lyrics*, we considered a famous sonnet in which Wordsworth laments what he sees as a growing alienation from the natural world as people are increasingly caught up in a materialist culture of "getting and spending." That poem, you may recall, concludes with the speaker longing for a more profound and reciprocal relationship with nature, but it doesn't really offer any reason *why* such a relationship would be so essential to the flourishing of humankind. The present poem—arguably Wordsworth's most famous—offers an answer to that question. In "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (a.k.a. the Daffodil poem), Wordsworth crafts his own experience of a scene of natural beauty into a psychological—perhaps even spiritual—model that demonstrates the sustaining power of an appreciation of natural beauty. At 24 lines, the poem is slightly longer than most of the *Influential Lyrics* offerings, but its short tetrameter lines, its decisive rhyme words, and its simple narrative make it a most memorable poem. So here is Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud":

[poem]

So there you have it! A lovely, rather sing-songy poem, one that is perhaps more immediately accessible than most influential lyrics. And, frankly, that's one of the real beauties of Wordsworth's poetry. Like the daffodil poem, his work is packed with easily visualized natural images, often represented in these highly rhythmic, strongly rhymed lines that make for very easy, pleasant reading. That said, let me offer a quick explication so that the overall structure and the literal meaning of the poem is clear.

The poem begins in the past tense with the speaker narrating the experience of a chance encounter with a scene of natural beauty.

> I wandered lonely as a cloud
> That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
> When all at once I saw a crowd,
> A host, of golden daffodils;
> Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
> Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Note that the speaker is initially isolated, detached, and lonely. "Wandering," after all, suggests some aimless or random movement as he "floats on high o'er vales and hills." But while in this disengaged mental state he sees the daffodils which present a pointed contrast to his own mood. Instead of a lonely detachment, these flowers are noteworthy for their multiplicity—they make up a "crowd" or even a "host"—and they are dynamically interacting with one another and with their environment. Rather than floating above it all like the speaker, these daffodils are "beside the lake, beneath the trees, / Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."

These qualities of energy and a multiplicity that seems almost infinite are underscored in the second stanza:

> Continuous as the stars that shine
> And twinkle on the milky way,
> They stretched in never-ending line
> Along the margin of a bay:
> Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
> Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The speaker is obviously enchanted by this encounter with the flowers and—crucially—his own mental state changes as he, in thought and mood at least, joins in with the daffodils:

> The waves beside them danced; but they
> Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
> A poet could not but be gay,
> In such a jocund company:

So much for the isolated detachment at the start of the poem! Now the speaker "could not but be gay, / In such a jocund company." (The word "jocund," by the way, means something like cheerful, sprightly, or joyful. It was in fairly common use in the 17th and 18th centuries, but has since fallen out of common speech. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says, rather drily, that "jocund" is "now exclusively a literary word."). Be that as it may, the general trajectory of the poem is clear. The poet is wandering and lonely but the vision of these daffodils has lifted his spirits and now he feels happily included in a "jocund company" of flowers.

So far so good…and I know what you might be thinking: *This is a pleasant poem about a guy who was feeling down, but when he saw some flowers he feels better. I get it, but what's so profound, so influential about a lyric like this*? Well, watch what happens next. First, there is a sort of transition as the poet begins to reflect on the significance of his experience:

> I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
> What wealth the show to me had brought

And what exactly is the "wealth" that the poet has taken from his experience? Wordsworth ends the poem like this:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the daffodils

So now we are no longer in the past tense, but rather in a continuous present—this is apparently an ongoing and recurrent after-effect of the daffodil experience. And note that the speaker in these closing lines once again describes himself as isolated, lying on his couch in "vacant or in pensive mood." He is listless, directionless, perhaps a little bit stressed or worried or depressed. But while in this condition, he happens to recollect the earlier experience with the daffodils—they "flash upon that inward eye"—and this remembered image transforms his low spirits into the "bliss of solitude." (The word "solitude," of course, has very different connotations than the word "loneliness"). He once again experiences the sort of pleasure and the (now virtual) community that he had had in the original experience. To put it briefly, the incident with the daffodils has been psychologically internalized. It's part of the poet's very being, a positive and ongoing influence on his mental and emotional health.

In his longer poems and other writings, Wordsworth describes what he calls "spots of time." These are moments in nature—the encounter with the daffodils is perhaps the quintessential example—that take on a formative, sustaining, and perhaps therapeutic power over his very sense of self, and that are foundational for the full development and fruition of a mature human mind. Without these sort of experiences in nature, we become nothing but economic agents consumed with the world of getting and spending which, at the time of Wordsworth's writing, was reshaping the whole culture of his native England. One can, I hope, begin to see why the poet in "The world is too much with us" sonnet

that we considered in the previous episode was so keen to develop an interactive, I-Thou relationship with the natural world around him!

This process of the internalization of natural imagery which is so central to Wordsworth's writing seems simple enough in the poems we've looked at thus far, but I would like to expand on two more related contexts: the perception of natural beauty and the emergence of an ecological consciousness.

First, about natural beauty—Let me begin with a question: Do you think other animals see beauty in nature? That is, do you think some creature like a coyote or a racoon is ever spellbound by a marvelous sunset? Or does a honeybee stop to admire the symmetry and color of the flower for its own sake, and not just for the nectar it may offer? It's a puzzling question, because we know that human beings *do* recognize and respond to natural beauty. We stop to admire a beautiful sunset; we hike miles to see a beautiful waterfall; and so on. Is the perception of beauty purely a human capacity? Does it distinguish us from other animals? I don't know the answer to these questions, but they do prompt me to consider Wordsworth's poem in a new light. After all, it is clearly a poem "about" a person being emotionally transformed by a beautiful natural scene, but that beauty is not some objective quality of the scene. The daffodils are objectively there, the waves on the lake, the breeze in the trees…these are all objectively there whether the speaker sees them or not. But to perceive this scene as beautiful and then to respond emotionally to that beauty, well…this is something conferred on the scene by the perceiver. *Nature* may well exist independent of a perceiver, but *natural beauty* of the sort the poet describes here is the result of an interchange between objective nature and the perceiving subject.

What I'd like to suggest, then, is that the very perception of beauty in nature is evidence of an I-Thou, reciprocal relationship rather than a mere I-It perception of an objective physical reality. It is the internalization and then recollection of such moments that, in Wordsworth's view, is so essential to the full development of a healthy human consciousness.

And this brings me to the second context: the rise of an ecological consciousness. To explain this I'll need to paint with a very broad historical brush, but the argument goes something like this: Prior to the late 18th century the predominant thinking about the place and purpose of human beings in the world was essentially religious. Think, for example, about how Anne Bradstreet expressed a core faith in the divine, a faith that enabled her to better cope with a challenging life; or think about how the speaker of George Herbert's "The Collar" realigns his greedy and rebellious ego with an acceptance of divine authority. Even the fun-loving Richard Lovelace acknowledges the primacy of devotion to his king (and, beyond the king, to God). The paradigm here is clear—the place and purpose of human beings is ultimately to acknowledge human frailty and "fallenness" and to strive to accept faithfully one's subordination to the divine. I realize, of course, that I am sketching a very general cultural formation—one can think of many individual exceptions—but those exceptions, I would argue, serve to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this religious paradigm.

With writers like Wordsworth, however, the pattern shifts away from a theological paradigm and toward what I'll call an ecological paradigm. When Wordsworth's speaker is lying on his couch in a vacant and pensive mood, he doesn't hear some divine call (like George Herbert) and he doesn't have

a supernatural visitation (like Anne Bradstreet). Instead, he has a sudden recollection of a scene of natural beauty, and this "spot of time" serves to elevate his spirits and even generates a sense of "bliss." The implications are, I think, profound. Nature, for Wordsworth, is not merely a source of pleasant imagery; more than this, it is a necessary element in the formation of a healthy and fulfilled human consciousness. Instead of seeing his place and purpose within some religious faith, he finds his greatest strength and greatest comfort in his relationship with the natural world. And, in using the term "ecological," I don't mean to suggest some sort of recognition that we depend on nature for the raw materials—food, shelter, etc.— which our physical lives require. Rather, I am using the term in a more psychological or even spiritual sense: our very humanity develops within and is sustained by our interactions with the natural world, most especially in our ability to perceive natural beauty and to stock our memories with "spots of time," the recollection of which elevates the spirit and generates these moments of bliss which are, for Wordsworth, the moments when we most fully recognize the dignity and creative power of our own humanity.

Interestingly, Wordsworth's ecological consciousness and his reverence for natural beauty don't exist in some simple binary with Nature as good and human culture as bad. He is *not* saying that to seek our own enlightenment we should all go live in the woods and turn our backs on the world of "getting and spending." Quite the contrary. In order to fully appreciate the therapeutic power of nature, we need to have some vantage point *outside* of nature from which we can recollect those "spots-of-time" scenes. This act of memory is, in effect, a fusion of the original natural scene and the human consciousness that remembers it; it serves to keep the attentive mind grounded in an ecological paradigm that transcends the social, political, and economic forces that would otherwise debase the full power and dignity of the human mind.

In the previous podcast I mentioned that the two Wordsworth lyrics I focus on in *Influential Lyrics* will highlight what I called a "sea change in Western culture." My hope is that with these two poems we can begin to see what that change involves: a shift from a theological paradigm to and ecological paradigm. I've been trying to summarize this key theme that occupies much of Wordsworth's poetry—from his famous "Tintern Abbey" (1798) and the "Intimations Ode" (1807) to his masterpiece called *The Prelude*, an autobiographical epic that wasn't finally published until after his death in 1850. It's an astonishing body of work—massively influential on his contemporary poets and on virtually all English poets who followed. Likewise, one can trace the origins of 21st-century environmental thought to Wordsworth's writing. I do hope you'll have time to explore this body of work, and I'll be happy to address any queries or suggestions you may have. And I hope especially that you'll stop in again for another episode of *Influential Lyrics*! Until then…happy reading!

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.]

Brennan, Matthew C. "Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud.'" *The Explicator*, vol. 57, no. 3, 1991, pages 40-43. < https://www-tandfonline-com.uab.idm.oclc.org/doi/abs/10.1080/00144949909596848 >. [Brennan links the experience in seeing the daffodils to other representations of the sublime in Wordsworth's poetry.]

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

Kennedy, Deborah. "Wordsworth's Daffodil Poem: Revisiting a Classic." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 1, 2025. < https://utppublishing.com/doi/10.3138/utq.94.01.01 >. [An extensive survey of the many renditions of Wordsworth's poem in critical and other cultural products. Fascinating study of the after-life and circulation of the poem.]

Wordsworth Grasmere [blog]. < https://wordsworth.org.uk/wordsworth/the-poetry/ >. [A very introductory blog page intended for admirers and tourists visiting Wordsworth's home in the Lake District. The page features the daffodil poem and images of the daffodils that still grow on the shores of the lakes.]

ETC....

Copyright © Kyle Grimes, Ph.D., all rights reserved

Influential Lyrics podcast, 1.11, published June 2026

Podcast Citation (MLA 9th edition):

Grimes, Kyle. "William Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud.'" *Influential Lyrics*, written and presented by Kyle Grimes, episode 1.11, June 2026. < influentiallyrics.com >.