**Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood-** [**WILLIAM WORDSWORTH**](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)

Wordsworth was a poet of Man. Wordsworth’s love of nature led him to love of humanity. In spite of the mystic strain in his poetry, no poet is more emphatically the poet of community. A great part of his verse is dedicated to the affections of home and neighbourhood and to that soul of joy and love which links together all Nature’s children and steals from man to earth and earth to man.’ Instead of dealing with lords and ladies, kings and princes, he chose Cumberland beggars, shepherds and leech gatherers for his subject.

Poet of Childhood

Wordsworth is the poet of childhood. He has vividly described the feeling of child life in his poetry. He has given us very high and exalted picture of child life in his famous poem ‘Ode on Intimations of Immorality’. He regarded the child as father of the man and a mighty prophet:

Mighty prophet sear blest,

On whom these truths do rest,

Which we are toiling all our lives to find.

As a teacher

Wordsworth wrote to Lady Beaumont , “every great poet is a teacher: I wish either to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing”. Again, in another letter, he stated his conviction that destiny of his poems was ‘to console the afflicted, to add sunshine to day-light by making the happy happier, to teach the young to become more actively and securely virtuous; this is their office, which I trust they will faithfully perform, long after we are mouldered in our graves’.

Introduction

The Ode was composed at Town-end Grasmere, between the years 1802 and 1806 and published in 1807. The controlling idea of this Ode is taken from Pythagoras, a Greek philosopher, who held that the immorality of soul consisted in succession of lives under various bodily shapes. According to him, knowledge was the recollection of experiences gained in previous lives. Plato also believed in another world of eternal ideas and architypes, the remembrance of which is not affected when the human soul is brought in this world. To a certain extent, these ideas found their way in Christian mystical writings. Wordsworth denied his belief in a succession of lives. He had in a doctrine a “poetic and not a religious faith.” He was undoubtedly indebted to Henry Vaughan’s ‘Retreat” for some of the ideas given in the Ode. As regards the doctrine of pre-existence, Wordsworth remarked: “to that dream-like vividness and splendour which invests objects of sight in childhood, everyone, I believe, if he would look back, could bear testimony.” It is far too shady shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith, as more than an element in our instincts of immorality. But let us bear in mind that, though the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing to contradict it and the fall of man presents an analogy in its favour. Accordingly, a pre-existent state has entered into the popular creeds of many nations is an ingredient in Platonic philosophy.

Wordsworth himself in later life was somewhat concerned as to the use to which he has put the doctrine. Yet what he is concerned about is, not that the doctrine may not be true, but that it may be intrusive; that it is not a part of the teaching of the Church, and may be misconceived as a qualifying or super sending. Nothing that he says anywhere suggests that he entertained the doctrine otherwise than seriously; and this only another of the cases where, we shall not understand him unless we believe what he tells us. We are no more in doubt that Wordsworth believed the doctrine that I doubt that Plato did- Coleridge’s scepticism, it will be noticed, extends even to Plato.

But for Wordsworth, it should be made clear; the doctrine has both a different foundation and a different significance from that which it has in Plato. Wordsworth is a pure sensationalist: Plato, on the other hand, is a pure intellectualist. To Plato the doctrine of reminiscence is a theory of knowledge: an explanation of how we get to know to think. The senses are the sources of all error. The world of ‘Ideas’ alone has truth. It is only by escape from the contamination of the senses only by getting away from the eyes and ears, that we are able to truly see or hear, and to come to the truth of the things. The process is a long and painful labour of abstraction. But to Wordsworth the truth of thongs comes in flashes, in gleams of sense perception; and in abstraction the truth dies. Wordsworth’s doctrine is in fact not a theory of knowledge, but a romance of sensation. The absorbing interest of Plato is the logical meanings of things: to Wordsworth logical meanings are precisely that part of thongs which has no value. There is some degree of delusion, therefore, in speaking of the Platonism of Wordsworth; and if we are to read the Ode rightly we shall do well to begin by putting Plato out of our minds.

The sense of loss described in the “Immorality Ode” bears the mark of an anguished interior monologue intended for the poet alone: it is ludicrous to think of this agonized as the comparatively mild emotion of one who no longer feels the presence of a superior human power in the hills, the lakes and, rocks the trees and flowers, of his beloved native land.

Substance of the Poem

In the childhood all things on earth seem to be clothed with a heavenly radiance. But the vision vanishes with the advance in years, though nature remains the same. In infancy, the soul retains some portion of its celestial light which it had in heaven. As we advance in life, this vision grows dim until it is completely lost in manhood. Yet the shadowy recollections of the past and the vanished glory remains and they continue haunt the human soul in manhood. The vision goes but its memory remains. This testifies to our heavenly origin, and our nearness to God when we were children. Though with growing age the realization of the supernatural element becomes more difficult, nature’s beauty remains constant for us. And the loss of the celestial light is compensated by the intuitive sympathy between man and nature. But man’s power of realizing this beauty is also lost in later years. Only sudden objects of nature then remind him of the glory and splendour of childhood. Sadness grows upon him; hedged in conversations he becomes narrow in his outlook and himself altogether cut off from divine effulgence. And the blessed childhood appears to the poet as surrounded with a halo, reminiscent of the heaven from where he had come. This loss of childhood’s knowledge of the supernatural, rarer and briefer occasions of the visions of Nature’s beauty are, however compensated by the adult’s fate in the life here after and sympathy for mankind in general.

Main arguments of the Poem

The main arguments of the poem may be briefly summarised thus:

The soul of man is divine; it comes into this earthly life, not a blank, but bringing with it high spiritual instincts and powers. But the interests of the mundane and the temporal encroach upon it; and the divine life instincts are stifled. We must strive, therefor, to keep these instincts alive, to maintain the continuity of spiritual life; to translate into the reasoned convictions of manhood the child’s innate and spontaneous faith. To do this we must live as much as possible among the deeper things of our own natures and in inmate communion with divine soul of universe. Then we shall rejoice that reminiscences of the distant past, faint and shadowy they be, do in fact bear witness to the soul’s divine origin and heritage and to its kinship with the eternal order of things.

Analysis of the Ode

There was a time in the childhood of the poet when nature seemed resplendent and every object appeared clothed in heavenly light. But that time is no more.

Things become very different as we fro up. Though nature remained the same as before, the poet felt in manhood that her glory had vanished. Even though he can still see the rainbow, the rose, the moon, and the sun, and even though they are still beautiful, something is different...something has been lost

The poet tries to sympathise with the universal joy and take delight in the general joyousness of nature. The mystical has departed and even the season of spring does not give him the joyous heart of a child. He is sad at heart but tries to supress his sadness. The poet is saddened by the birds singing and the lambs jumping in the third stanza. Soon, however, he resolves not to be depressed, because it will only put a damper on the beauty of the season. He declares that all of the earth is happy, and exhorts the shepherd boy to shout.

But certain tree a field remind him of joys of childhood and the early associations are brought back to his mind.

Why do we not see the visions which we could see in childhood. Before our birth we existed in heaven. The traces of our divine origin remain with us in our infancy, but they gradually fade away before advancing manhood. Just as dreams are forgotten in waking hours, so we forget our existence when born into this world. Even in our youth we possess dim collections of its glory, and we are conscious of our loss.

All earthly things tend to make us forget our heavenly origin. Nature or earth tries her best to make man forget the glories of his previous existence by providing him with material joys and pleasures. Earth is after all man’s foster-mother.

Even the infant, forgetful of his high origin, imitates the doings of his elders, and thus forgets the glories he has known. He is at strife with his blessedness. Wordsworth examines the transitory state of childhood. He is pained to see a child's close proximity to nature being replaced by a foolish acting game in which the child pretends to be an adult before he actually is. Instead, Wordsworth wants the child to hold onto the glory of nature that only a person in the flush of youth can appreciate.

The child is the best philosopher, but he will soon become a slave to conventions, customs and thus lose his heaven-born freedom.

Yet there is consolation. The traces of our previous existence are not wholly lost. We retain even in manhood the memory of innocence and freedom of our childhood. The poet is glad that he can still remember the visions of his childhood, and more so fa the feeling of the unreality of the material world, which often comes back upon him in his highest spiritual moods and tells him of his spiritual feelings.

The poet can still rejoice in nature. As he can partly remember the high instincts of childhood he feels happy and joins even in the gaiety of animal life. The bright and dream like visions of childhood are lost but they are compensated by the human sympathies of mature years. He still retains his spiritual sensitiveness to nature and sees nobler meanings in the beauty of the humblest flower.

He realizes that even though he has lost his awareness of the glory of nature, he had it once, and can still remember it. The memory of nature's glory will have to be enough to sustain him, and he ultimately decides that it is. Anything that we have, for however short a time, can never be taken away completely, because it will forever be held in our memory.