

The Effect of Affect in William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"

Although William Wordsworth's poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" ostensibly celebrates the speaker's joyous connection with nature, it is more deeply about their power to imagine. Wordsworth puts the immaterial in conversation with the material and illustrates how the internal world of fantasy and emotion works in tandem with the external world of "things." Upon a closer look of the poem, the reader will find that the speaker does not describe the landscape much at all but rather how their relationship with the landscape has shifted over time. Wordsworth's use of affect in the second stanza of "Tintern Abbey" fractures the reader's sense of time, space, and speaker, making it a universal poem about our search to capture the sublimity of life.

The structure of "Tintern Abbey" contributes to the overall ambiguity of the poem by roping the reader into it and having them lose themselves within the text. A simple read through the poem will reveal that it is written in blank verse, not restrained by stringent rules but also not entirely structureless. Since Wordsworth writes lengthy sentences and the lines are written in iambic pentameter, the reader is naturally pulled into the world of the poem which they quickly realize morphs into the mind of the speaker. Wordsworth's use of complex syntax and enjambment makes it difficult for the reader to pause and thereby propels the reader forward in an almost hypnotic fashion. Take for example the beginning of the second stanza:

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind

With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure (lines 23-32).

Wordsworth uses caesuras to divide his long sentences into bite-sized pieces the reader can swallow, but the overall density of his language makes it difficult for readers to ground themselves in the poem. Just when readers think they know where they are being led after reading the first stanza that details the speaker's excitement to be back in the vicinity of Tintern Abbey, the second stanza sways the reader in an entirely different direction that contrasts the idyllic landscape. The reader is kept on their toes, so while they are fully immersed in Wordsworth's decorative language, they are not sedated by it because of its unpredictability and the fact that it does not recount a clear and cohesive narrative.

The second stanza initiates a significant tonal shift in "Tintern Abbey" that fractures the time, space, and speaker throughout the rest of the poem. As the landscape dissolves into a cityscape, Tintern Abbey becomes nothing more than a thought with powerful emotional links. The speaker transitions from the physical world to the metaphysical realm by describing themselves thinking about Tintern Abbey sometime in the past. The speaker returns to the past in the fourth stanza when they compare their immature relationship with the land as a child to their deeper admiration for the land as an adult in the present. The reader goes from imagining the speaker situated in a specific place and time ("Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798") to having the speaker fracture themselves into different narrators across time and space as the reader is moved to envision a past version of the speaker "in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities" (lines 26-27). Like an untethered soul, the speaker is able to jump across dimensions and create a panoramic view of the variable soul in relation to the land.

The thought of Tintern Abbey alone is infused with a sublime emotion that the speaker ventures to articulate and make manifest. While the first stanza is composed of terse, pictorial

sentences, the second stanza is composed of lengthy, philosophical sentences that alters the tone of the poem from *descriptive* in the first stanza to *affective* in the second stanza. The goal of the poem is thereby transferred from wanting the reader to *see* something to wanting the reader to *feel* something. The speaker goes so far as to compare their distant relationship with the land as to that of “a blind man’s eye” (line 25) and then continues by describing the “sweet[ness]” they “Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart” (line 29). The second stanza marks when the speaker becomes concerned with generating a similar sense of peace within the reader as opposed to painting a realistic image of the land in the reader’s mind. The repetition of the word “felt” assures the reader that they should be experiencing strong feelings as well. The speaker recounts feeling sheer bliss at the thought of Tintern Abbey that they do not even have to tie their feelings back to a particular material memory, “feelings too / Of unremembered pleasure” (lines 31-32).

The speaker uses the external physical world to ease their tumultuous internal world—it is their extrospection that enables them to be introspective. Creating an equilibrium between these two worlds that are separated by our skin is a theme that runs throughout the entire poem. The speaker uses anaphora to emphasize the impression the physical world makes on the immaterial world within us:

that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on (lines 38-43).

The repetition of “in which” and “blessed mood” underscores the healing properties of nature and how it can give us inklings of hope and meaning during times in our lives that feel hopeless and meaningless. The alliteration and stresses placed on “weary weight” slows down the rhythm and forces the reader to get a sense of the heaviness of the speaker’s soul that is eventually

“lightened.” It is almost as if the speaker begs the reader to think of a time when they felt similarly and to identify with them when they say that “the affections gently lead *us* on” (line 43, italics added for emphasis). The speaker assumes that the reader is familiar with this almost inexplicable feeling of sublimity and considers themselves as part of a universal collective.

As the speaker becomes more divided across different planes of time and space, they also become disembodied and so does the reader. The speaker must let go of their body in order to absorb the sublime fully:

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul (lines 44-47).

To live entirely, the speaker must undergo a certain kind of material death that allows them to transcend into a spiritual existence. The second stanza solidifies “Tintern Abbey” as a transcendentalist poem because the speaker praises the human capacity to “see into the life of things” (line 50) by releasing our hold on our somatic bodies and harmonizing our liberated souls with nature. The reader also shares in the speaker’s disembodiment because up until this point, the speaker only refers to themselves using the singular first-person pronoun, but towards the end of the second stanza the speaker uses the plural first-person pronouns “us” and “we,” situating themselves within a community of souls that includes the reader. Perhaps the “us” and “we” could also be referring to the speaker’s multiplicity of selves. Either way, the speaker recognizes that to live means to let go.

This mutual codependency between nature and our spirits is demonstrated by the fact that the speaker’s growth is measured by the way they interact with and perceive the land—that is the only sense of time passing we get in the poem. “Tintern Abbey” may be a lyrical ballad, but it becomes something of a meditative prayer as well, not to God or even Nature but more to

themselves. This poem is a celebration of the multi-dimensional human spirit and its capacity to mature and appreciate the world around us by looking deeper within ourselves. It is a dramatic monologue about the pleasures of seeing the world clearly when we are wise enough to contemplate our existence as being part of a much larger whole and leveraging the material world to make our immaterial selves richer.