Expostulation and Reply

POEM TEXT

"Why William, on that old grey stone,
Thus for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away?

"Where are your books?—that light bequeathed
To Beings else forlorn and blind!
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind.

"You look round on your Mother Earth,
As if she for no purpose bore you;
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you!"

One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,
When life was sweet, I knew not why,
To me my good friend Matthew spake,
And thus I made reply:

"The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against, or with our will.

"Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?

"—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may,
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away."

SUMMARY

"William, why have you been sitting on that old gray rock for so long, daydreaming all by yourself?

And where on earth are your books? They're a true and enlightening gift to human beings, who would be shortsighted, helpless fools without them. Get up and read, absorbing the knowledge passed down from the already-dead to us soon-to-be-dead mortals!

You're looking idly around at Mother Earth as if she gave birth to you for no reason—as if you were the only person alive and didn't have anything to learn from earlier generations!"

I was sitting by Esthwaite Lake one day, relishing life for no reason in particular, when my buddy Matthew said these words to me. Here's how I answered him:

"Our eyes can't help seeing, our ears can't help hearing, and our bodies feel things whether we like it or not.

Likewise, I happen to believe that there are some forces in the world that make an impression on us all by themselves, so we can learn merely by having the wisdom to sit quietly and wait.

Do you really think that, in this world that's talking to us all the time, nothing will ever come to us on its own—that we always have to run after knowledge?

No? Then don't ask me why I'm sitting here quietly (well, having a conversation now, I guess), perched on an old gray rock and daydreaming."

THEMES

NATURAL WISDOM VS. HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

William, the speaker of "Expostulation and Reply," is having a perfectly lovely afternoon sitting on an "old grey stone" and daydreaming—until his friend Matthew interrupts him, nagging him to get back to his books. In Matthew's view, the accumulated human knowledge contained in books is the only thing that keeps people from being helpless and "blind," stumbling ignorantly through life. William retorts that there's no need to run after human knowledge all the time: the natural world is full of "Powers" that communicate deep wisdom to anyone who's willing to sit quietly and listen. The poem thus suggests that nature isn't just full of wisdom, but *generous* with it—and that, unlike human knowledge, natural wisdom comes, well, naturally.

Matthew's argument for books is that they illuminate people's

lives by passing down knowledge from one generation to the next. Books keep people from being stuck in the dark: they record what earlier thinkers have already discovered, and thus light the path for those who come after them. Only through study, Matthew believes, can one lead a worthwhile life. To him, William's daydreaming looks like an isolated self-indulgence that cuts William off from the rest of society and prevents him from striving.

But to William, book-learning isn't the only kind of wisdom: nature also has a lot to teach those who know how to listen. Merely sitting on an "old grey stone" and gazing out over "Esthwaite lake," he can feel the "Powers" of nature stirring, teaching him without any effort of his own. Nature reaches out to people who are willing to embrace "wise passiveness," absorbing the world on its own terms—and gives them a soul-deep wisdom that could never be contained in mere books.

Daydreaming outdoors might look like doing nothing useful, this poem suggests. But those who sit quietly in nature and open themselves expectantly to its silent "Powers" actually gain a kind of wisdom one can't get any other way.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

ACTIVELY SEEKING VS. PASSIVELY RECEIVING KNOWLEDGE

"Expostulation and Reply" frames a debate between Matthew, who argues that people should spend their time actively learning from books, and William, who replies that people can learn plenty just from sitting quietly outside. On the one hand, this is an argument about human knowledge versus natural wisdom. But on an even more basic level, it's an argument about *seeking* versus *receiving*. To William (and, the reader suspects, to William Wordsworth), wisdom isn't always a matter of actively seeking knowledge. It can also be a "wise passiveness," a willingness to wait for new understandings to arrive rather than rushing after them.

Matthew argues that the only way to learn is to *try* to learn, applying oneself to a rigorous course of study. To do anything else—like idly sitting on an "old grey stone," just for instance—is to "dream one's life away," wasting one's time and living only for oneself.

To William, though, a "wise passiveness" is in fact the *only* way to gain certain kinds of understanding. Observing that people see, hear, and feel all the time—whether they like it or not!—William suggests that everyone can *always* pick up messages from the mysterious "Powers" that surround them. What's more, those powers can "feed" people's minds without people even trying: just as one sees and hears effortlessly, so one can learn effortlessly, just by sitting down calmly and waiting for nature's "Powers" to communicate in their own time.

And the kind of wisdom one gets from "wise passiveness," the poem suggests, is a different flavor than the wisdom one gets from books. Books can collect and transmit things that are *already* known, the "spirit breathed / by dead men" to their descendants. But "wise passiveness" allows nature to speak directly to individual people, teaching them personal, mysterious lessons that might not altogether fit into a book-learning framework.

While "wise passiveness" might look like laziness or selfishness to Matthew, the poem argues that it's actually just another way of learning: a willingness to sit with (and embrace!) what one *doesn't* know, not just chase after what people *already* know.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

"Why William, on that old grey stone,
Thus for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away?

"Expostulation and Reply" begins with an exasperated outburst from an as-yet-unknown speaker. This, readers will soon learn, is Matthew—and he's fed up with his old friend William, who's sitting on an "old grey stone" as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Right away, Matthew sounds like a pretty exacting guy. He notices that William has been sitting there for precisely "half a day," for instance, and feels that to sit thoughtfully alone like this is to "dream your time away." And his voice suggests that he feels rather indignant about the way that William chooses to use his time: he asks "Why William" not once, but twice, his emphatically alliterative repetition suggesting his righteous bafflement. These first words also hint that part of what he objects to is the way William is sitting *alone*, not participating in the social world.

In leaping straight into this dialogue, the poem bursts in on the reader just as Matthew bursts in on William's peaceful daydreaming. This abrupt, lively beginning introduces what will become a debate between, not just two friends, but two approaches to life: an active, striving mode, and a passive, receptive mode. The question at hand is: does all wisdom come from the active pursuit of knowledge and from the study of what humanity has already discovered? Or are there subtler, quieter, more personal ways of knowing and learning?

That the daydreamer here is named "William" suggests that the author of this poem—one William Wordsworth, don't you know—is likely to think at least a little differently than the idealistic-but-blustery Matthew. This will be a poem about what one can learn from being not a seeker, but a receiver.

LINES 5-8

"Where are your books?—that light bequeathed
To Beings else forlorn and blind!
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind.

Matthew continues his "expostulation" by pointedly asking William: why on earth aren't you reading something? Books, in Matthew's view, are a "light"—and not just any light, but a sacred light passed down from generation to generation, "bequeathed" like a precious heirloom. The metaphor of book-learning as light is itself a pretty old idea, and it suggests that Matthew practices what he preaches. His language for thinking about books is itself an inheritance from the past.

Without books, Matthew goes on, people would be "forlorn and blind"—lonely, frightened, and utterly unable to see where they're going. To look back on the accumulated human wisdom one finds in books, in Matthew's eyes, is also to find a path forward.

Books might even offer a way to reckon with mortality. When Matthew encourages William to leap up and scurry right back to the wisdom that "dead men" leave to "their kind," he suggests that part of studying books is coming to terms with the fact that everyone will one day be just as dead as the ancients who left their wisdom behind. The best thing people can do in the meantime is to soak up the work of the great thinkers of the past, to get to grips with a frightening and confusing world.

Matthew's second metaphor in this stanza uses a telling three-way pun on the word "spirit." Encouraging William to "drink the spirit breathed / From dead men to their kind," he seems to be saying three things at once:

- If this "spirit" is a kind of liquor—that is, the thing one would ordinarily "drink"—then it's a strong, intoxicating beverage, something that can alter one's perceptions.
- If this "spirit" is breath—that is, the thing one would normally "breathe"—then it's a fundamental, life-giving inheritance from the past.
- And if this "spirit" is a soul—that is, the thing that might pass from "dead men"—then it's something of the dead that remains in all those books, a deathly immortality.

This is powerful stuff! Matthew isn't just telling William to learn from the past, but to absorb it and be changed by it, getting filled up with the "spirits" of the dead in more senses than one.

This grand and solemn idea might also feel a little claustrophobic. Breathing dead men's "spirits" sounds pretty musty—especially for someone like William, who's happily sitting alone in the fresh air on his "old grey stone." Doing as Matthew suggests and devoting oneself to books might be inspiring, and might help one to be part of a legacy of great thinkers. But it might also be just a little bit deadening.

LINES 9-12

"You look round on your Mother Earth,
As if she for no purpose bore you;
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you!"

In the final stanza of his "expostulation," Matthew mildly scolds William for behaving as if he were the only person on earth. Now his reasoning comes into clearer focus. Not only does he want William to absorb the wisdom of the past, he wants William to see himself as part of the human community: not an isolated rock-sitter, but a member of society, one who ought to act with "purpose" and to learn from other people.

But the way he describes what he sees as William's selfishness accidentally makes that selfishness sound pretty delightful. The idea of looking around on a personified "Mother Earth" as if one could enjoy her company all by oneself, with nowhere to go and nothing to do but appreciate nature's glory—well, one can see why William wouldn't mind spending his time this way rather than holed up in the library.

Yet Matthew is indignant—perhaps teasingly, perhaps sincerely, perhaps both. Listen to the alliterative polpytoton in these lines:

> As if she for no purpose **bore** you;
> As if you were her first-**born birth**,

All those variations on words to do with birth (and the strong /b/ sounds that connect them) make Matthew sound emphatic. But they also draw extra attention to the attractive idea of being Mother Nature's only child—the "first-born" who sees everything with fresh eyes.

This stanza thus gets readers thinking about two ideas that will be important in the rest of the poem: individuality and nature. Matthew objects to William behaving as if he were the only person alive, and as if it were valuable to merely sit and look at the natural world. William is about to answer that these ways of being provide a kind of wisdom that won't fit into any book, and that none of the "dead men" who have come before him can provide.

LINES 13-16

One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,
When life was sweet, I knew not why,
To me my good friend Matthew spake,

And thus I made reply:

It's only in the middle of the poem that we learn who's telling this story. It is, of course, the very William whom Matthew has been scolding, and he doesn't seem too perturbed by anything Matthew has said.

This stanza transforms the immediacy of the first three stanzas of dialogue into a memory: it was "one morning" that Matthew said all these things. And William's memory of this morning softens Matthew's "expostulation," too. William doesn't remember being rudely interrupted; instead, he recalls that his "good friend Matthew" had these words to say to him.

Perhaps some of that softness also comes from the circumstances. William was up "by Esthwaite lake," looking over the waters and feeling that "life was sweet"—though he "knew not why." That sense of sweetness without a reason will underlie much of his "reply" to Matthew, and it seems to flow from the landscape.

Esthwaite Lake here works as a symbol of the kind of wisdom one can absorb simply by sitting in nature: a deep, still, profound kind of knowledge. But it's also significant that it's one lake in particular, a named place. Not only does this detail show that the poem is set in the Lake District (where Wordsworth spent his most brilliant and productive years), it suggests that there's something important about *identity* going on here. William could easily just have said that he was sitting by a beautiful lake. Instead, by specifying one lake in particular, he notes that all the features of nature have identity and personality, their own particular qualities.

This stanza works as a kind of hinge, the midpoint of a chiasmus. In the rest of the poem, William will address Matthew's points in reverse order, meeting his ideas with a step-by-step proposal of a different theory of life.

LINES 17-20

"The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against, or with our will.

William begins his "reply" to Matthew with a peculiar series of personifications, imagining the human body as a kind of collective of conscious sense organs. The eyes, the ears, and the nerves are always *on*, he observes, always feeling and perceiving, no matter what "our will" would prefer.

In other words, the human body is *sensitive* in every way, a nonstop perception party. Human bodies, William suggests, are built to sense the world all the time—so much so that people don't have any conscious say in the matter. (One can only close one's eyes and plug one's ears for so long!)

By casting the eye, the ear, and even the body itself as characters separate from "us" and "our will"—independent figures that "we" can't argue with—William suggests that there's something important about the *involuntary* parts of human life. The very nature of the human body makes it silly to imagine that people are in total control of what they absorb from the outside world.

This strikes a contrast with Matthew's enthusiasm for seeking out knowledge and wisdom from books—a process that Matthew presents as a directed, focused, and voluntary act. One only has to "read" the human body, William suggests, to see that direct, focused, and voluntary effort doesn't give a complete picture of the way that people take the world in.

LINES 21-24

"Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

In this important stanza, William draws an analogy between people's constant involuntary *physical* perceptions of the world and their constant involuntary *intellectual* perceptions of the world. In William's view, the world is full of "Powers," mysterious forces that present themselves to the human mind just as involuntarily as sights, sounds, and sensations present themselves to the ear, the eye, and the body. It's as if some kinds of thoughts arrive in the human mind as effortlessly as light strikes the eyeball.

This is a complex and subtle idea. If the sense organs and the mind work analogously, automatically receiving sensation and thought, maybe they also work together. In other words, perhaps sitting quietly on an "old grey stone" and letting one's sensory organs do their thing is also a way of letting those "Powers" do *their* thing, delivering wisdom effortlessly to the mind.

That's part of what William means when he suggests that "we can feed this mind of ours / In a wise passiveness." Being wisely passive means *not* struggling, *not* striving, *not* working, but waiting patiently for the powers of the world to speak. Since the mind is to these powers as the eyeball is to light, *trying* to receive messages from them would be as absurd as *trying* to see when one opens one's eyes.

And there's a hint here that trying might actually get in the way of the kind of natural wisdom William is interested in. The only necessary effort here, in William's eyes, is to *stop* trying: to sit down quietly and wait. Dashing off to the library all the time might just drown out the wisdom that comes without effort.

William's way of describing the "Powers" of the world might in itself be read as an example of "wise passiveness." He doesn't presume to identify what those powers might be, or where they come from, or what they want. But he does personify them, suggesting that they're *actors*, conscious forces with designs on the human mind. In this light, sitting down with "Mother Nature" sounds like having a real relationship: not just relating

to the world as a person relates to an object, but as a person relates to another person.

That sheds new light on Matthew's objection that William is sitting around as if "none had lived before" him—selfishly removing himself from the current of human thought. William is certainly having a kind of interaction. But it's with something that is other than human.

And it is, also, a deeply personal interaction. It's true that William is standing apart from all the "dead men" who have "lived before." But these lines also suggest that there are some kinds of wisdom that are *individual* rather than collective, personal rather than societal.

But even that idea is complicated by William's language! Take another look at the last two lines of this stanza:

> That we can feed this mind of ours
> In a wise passiveness.

"Wise passiveness" is an attitude that "we," all the members of the human race, can take—and it feeds what seems to be a single shared "mind." It's at once a deeply personal and universal way of relating to the world.

LINES 25-28

> *"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum*
> *Of things for ever speaking,*
> *That nothing of itself will come,*
> *But we must still be seeking?*

In these lines, William questions Matthew directly, asking him, in essence: *"Do you really think that, in a world that's speaking to you all the time, you always have to run after knowledge, and no wisdom will come to you on its own?"*

Listen to his musical assonance in lines 27-28:

> That nothing of itself will come,
> But we must still be seeking?

The contrast between muted /uh/ sounds in line 27 and sharper /ee/ sounds in line 28 dramatizes the distinction William is talking about here: the soft receptivity of "wise passiveness" versus Matthew's pointed intellectual "seeking."

There's both a shimmer of awe and a touch of mildly irritated amusement in William's tone here. The "mighty sum / Of things forever speaking" is a pretty grand and thunderous way to describe the natural world. But the "Think you" with which William addresses Matthew sounds almost wry.

This mixture of tones adds yet another layer of complexity to this deceptively simple-looking poem, and underlines the simultaneous wonder and simplicity of "wise passiveness." Seeking wisdom William's way is, on the one hand, the most ordinary thing in the world, as natural as seeing. On the other hand, it's a mystery and a miracle, almost too deep to be believed: how can it be that merely sitting on an "old grey stone" can "impress" the "Powers" of the world on the human mind?

Part of the insight William seems to have gained from his quiet time in nature seems to be exactly this paradox of ordinariness and miraculousness.

LINES 29-32

> *"—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,*
> *Conversing as I may,*
> *I sit upon this old grey stone,*
> *And dream my time away."*

The poem ends exactly where it began: with William perching on that same "old grey stone" that Matthew noted in the poem's first line. This repetition suggests that "Expostulation and Reply" has come full circle. William has reflected each of Matthew's points back to him, with a difference: while Matthew advocates for active, intellectual, social learning, William replies that passive, receptive, solitary learning offers a whole different kind of wisdom.

But here at the end of the poem, the reader is also forced to reckon with an underlying irony. All along, William has been arguing for a kind of learning you can't get from books—in a poem, in a book! (Readers might also reflect that, as they sit here absorbing this poem, they're doing something a lot like what Matthew suggests: sitting with the words of "dead men.")

In other words, the question here isn't so much whether active or passive wisdom is *better*. It's about how these two forms of knowledge interact with each other, and how they support each other. William isn't rebuking Matthew for the idea that book learning is valuable. He's suggesting that it's not the *only* kind of learning that's valuable—and that it might be pretty easy to get so caught up in striving that one forgets to sit down and wait, too.

The "Expostulation and Reply" between Matthew and William might thus be read as a kind of balancing-out—a Romantic answer to Enlightenment ideas about reason and knowledge. Not everything we know and perceive, William suggests, is under our control—and to know this is to come into contact with great and mysterious "Powers."

SYMBOLS

THE OLD GREY STONE

The stone upon which William perches symbolizes his firm conviction in the power of nature.

Stones are a common symbol of steadfastness, and this one suggests that William both feels stubbornly convinced that dreaming in nature provides a special kind of wisdom. It's as if

this ancient stone itself has taught him how to sit perfectly still.

The stone might also suggest the way that humans and nature interact: perhaps it's a fallen stone from an old wall, an image of the way that the natural world both provides for and outlasts humanity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** ""Why William, on that old grey stone, / Thus for the length of half a day, / Why, William, sit you thus alone, / And dream your time away?"
- **Lines 29-32:** ""—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone, / Conversing as I may, / I sit upon this old grey stone, / And dream my time away.""

BOOKS

The books that Matthew tries to hurry William back to symbolize the collected mass of human knowledge and effort.

Book-learning, in Matthew's eyes, is both a way of understanding the world, and a way of being connected to all the people who have come before one. Books are a "light," but they also contain the "spirit" of "dead men," passing down ancient wisdom.

Books are thus an image of shared, collective, effortful learning—as against the kind of personal, mysterious wisdom that William draws from his "wise passiveness."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** ""Where are your books?—that light bequeathed / To Beings else forlorn and blind! / Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed / From dead men to their kind."

POETIC DEVICES

CHIASMUS

The whole poem takes the form of an extended chiasmus, a pattern of thought that retraces its steps and ends back where it began. By responding to Matthew's "expostulation" point by point, the speaker at last makes it back to exactly where he was in the first place, content to "dream [his] time away."

The basic structure of this chiasmus runs like this:

- Matthew finds William sitting on an "old grey stone" and asks him why he's doing so.
    - Matthew tells William to go energetically pursue the "light" of books and study.
        - Matthew observes that William is just uselessly looking around him at "Mother Earth."
            - William tells the reader the circumstances of this conversation (the midpoint of the chiasmus).
        - William explains that looking receptively around at the natural world is an automatically enlightening experience.
    - William further explains that energetically pursuing knowledge isn't the only way to learn.
- Finally, William says that taking in natural wisdom is exactly why he's sitting on this "old grey stone."

This structure helps the poem to feel *reflective*, literally: by mirroring Matthew's argument in his "reply," William seems to be trying to give Matthew a new perspective. Rather than just saying "buzz off and let me enjoy my lake-gazing," he answers Matthew point by point.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

PERSONIFICATION

The poem's personification underlines William's point that the world isn't a passive thing: nature acts on people just as people act on nature.

Funnily enough, it's Matthew who first personifies nature here. He tells William:

> "You look round on your Mother Earth,
> As if she for no purpose bore you;
> As if you were her first-born birth,

Presenting the world as "Mother Earth" here, Matthew suggests that William is behaving as if he were a spoiled only child. Perhaps Matthew sees being one of Mother Earth's children as a bit more of a responsibility: in his eyes, it's every person's duty to go out and make something of the life this loving parent gave them.

William replies by first personifying, not nature, but parts of the body:

> "The eye—it cannot choose but see;
> We cannot bid the ear be still;

This is a curious way of putting it! One might more usually say that it's the person who *has* eyes and ears who "cannot choose but" take in the world. By personifying the eye and the ear here, William makes them seem like spellbound characters in a fairy tale, caught in a constant state of observation. He might even suggest that a person might sometimes be at odds with their always-on body: "we cannot bid the ear be still," we can't make the ear stop hearing.

But this state of constant involuntary attention is also what allows for "wise passiveness": because the body is always alert, it's always ready to absorb the world around it. And that world is always *on*, just as much as the body is, full of "things for ever speaking." Here, the world is consciously and constantly delivering messages, waiting for someone's active ear to receive them.

William's flavor personification thus suggests that the world isn't just full of lessons: it's a living force that wants to communicate.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** ""You look round on your Mother Earth, / As if she for no purpose bore you; / As if you were her first-born birth,"
- **Lines 17-20:** ""The eye—it cannot choose but see; / We cannot bid the ear be still; / Our bodies feel, where'er they be, / Against, or with our will."
- **Line 26:** "things for ever speaking,"

REPETITION

The repetitions in "Expostulation and Reply" give the debate between Matthew and William some of its energy.

For instance, the anaphora (the repetition of "As if" at the start of two lines in a row) and polyptoton ("bore"/"born"/birth") in stanza 3 make Matthew sound almost indignant at William's daydreaming:

> "You look round on your Mother Earth,
> As if she for no purpose bore you;
> As if you were her first-born birth,

Here, Matthew repeats his language to develop his idea. First, he says that it's as if William was born only to daydream; then, he says William is in fact behaving as if he were the only person on earth, and had no responsibilities. But the way he repeats words to do with birth actually undermines his own argument a little. To William, solitary, personal experience is one very good reason not to study other people's thoughts all the time: he might well answer that, yes, feeling as if one were Mother Nature's "first-born birth" is a *great* reason to sit quietly outside for a while.

William begins his "reply" to Matthew with some similarly insistent diacope:

> "The eye—it cannot choose but see;
> We cannot bid the ear be still;

That repeated "cannot" stresses one of William's major points: people perceive and experience the world all the time, whether they try to or not. Therefore, one doesn't have to scurry after knowledge: one can just wait patiently for wisdom to arrive.

Another important repetition draws attention to the "old grey stone" upon which William sits at the beginning and end of the poem. This stone might symbolize both the ancient wisdom of the earth and William's unshakeable conviction that this wisdom is worth waiting for. When it reappears at the end of the poem, it suggests that Matthew's arguments haven't moved William one jot.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ""Why William," "old grey stone,"
- **Line 3:** "Why, William"
- **Line 4:** "And dream your time away?"
- **Line 7:** "Up! up!"
- **Line 10:** "As if"
- **Line 11:** "As if," "first-born birth"
- **Line 17:** "cannot"
- **Line 18:** "cannot"
- **Line 22:** "minds"
- **Line 23:** "mind"
- **Lines 31-32:** "I sit upon this old grey stone, / And dream my time away.""

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help to make the two speakers' positions feel vivid and tangible.

For instance, take a look at the metaphors Matthew uses in the poem's second stanza. First. he imagines books as a "light," the only thing illuminating the path for "Beings else forlorn and blind"—that is, for all of mixed-up, bumbling, frightened humanity. The idea of the knowledge one gathers from books as a kind of illumination is an ancient and common one. And it makes sense that Matthew, as a person advocating for a kind of learning that gets "bequeathed" from generation to generation, would choose a hallowed old metaphor like this to make his case.

Slightly less common is the complex metaphor he uses in lines 7-8, in which he encourages William to "drink the spirit breathed / From dead men to their kind." This is a metaphor, but it's also a pun. "Spirit" here can be read as:

- liquor, the kind of spirit one typically "drink[s]";
- breath, the kind of spirit one typically "breathe[s]";

- or the soul, the kind of spirit that typically belongs to "dead men."

That complex pun suggests that Matthew is advocating, not just for embracing the wisdom of the dead, but for making it part of oneself: breathing books like air and getting intoxicated by them like liquor. There's something both heady and a little musty about this metaphor! On the one hand, this kind of reading sounds like a deep communion with the past. On the other hand, breathing dead men's air sounds a little, well, deadening.

William's own metaphor suggests that he's looking for something a little fresher from life. When he says that "life was sweet," he's using a metaphor so common it's become a cliché, hard even to recognize as a metaphor any more. But he's also saying something meaningful. He doesn't want to inhale dead air, but to eat life straight off the vine, like fresh fruit. When he imagines "feed[ing]" the mind on that sweetness, he suggests that learning through "wise passiveness" is not just powerful, but delicious.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "your books?—that light bequeathed / To Beings else forlorn and blind!"
- **Lines 7-8:** "drink the spirit breathed / From dead men to their kind."
- **Line 14:** "life was sweet,"
- **Line 23:** "we can feed this mind of ours"

IMAGERY

There's only one little flicker of imagery in "Expostulation and Reply": for the most part, the poem leaves its scenery to the imagination. But the poem's references to the "old grey stone" upon which William perches help to conjure the setting (and give the poem a little symbolic structure).

It might seem a little bit redundant to point out that a stone is "old": rocks are *proverbially* old, the very image of ancientness. But by pointing out that the stone William sits on as he looks over Esthwaite Lake, the poem subtly underlines the idea that nature is older and wiser than any of the "dead men" whose books Matthew so enthusiastically advocates for. The stone where William perches existed long before William and Matthew came along, and will exist long after them, too.

But the specific image of an "old grey stone" also evokes a whole Lake District scene, a landscape studded with ancient boulders, and perhaps ruins. This grey stone's age might even suggest that it was once part of an old building, now fallen: another example of the way that nature gets the final word.

The imagery of the "old grey stone" thus subtly encourages readers to keep the ancient "Powers" of the world in mind.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "that old grey stone"
- **Line 31:** "old grey stone,"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds force to both Matthew's indignant "expostulation" and William's solemn "reply."

Matthew sounds shocked by William's idleness right from the start: the alliterative /w/ of "'**W**hy **W**illiam'" adds a little extra sting of intensity to his voice. (He even repeats those exact words a few lines later.) But he really picks up steam in the second stanza:

> "Where are your **b**ooks?—that light **b**equeathed
> To **B**eings else forlorn and **b**lind!

All those forceful /b/ sounds make Matthew sound **b**luntly insistent, suggesting he has no doubts whatsoever about the best way for people to spend their time.

William's reply uses gentler, calmer alliteration that reflects his "wise passiveness," his more receptive approach to learning. Listen to the sounds in stanza 7:

> "Think you, '**m**id all this **m**ighty **s**um
> Of things for ever **s**peaking,
> That nothing of itself will come,
> But we must **s**till be **s**eeking?

The /m/ and /s/ alliteration here feels quietly intense. The /m/ of "'**m**id" and "**m**ighty" suggests quiet intensity: the **m**ight of nature doesn't yell, but **m**ur**m**urs. And the sibilant /s/ alliteration here feels like a whisper. It's rather as if William is trying to tell Matthew a secret—or as if he's hinting that Matthew could maybe keep his voice down a little.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Why William"
- **Line 3:** "Why, William"
- **Line 5:** "books," "bequeathed"
- **Line 6:** "Beings," "blind"
- **Line 7:** "breathed"
- **Line 10:** "bore"
- **Line 11:** "born birth"
- **Line 19:** "where'er"
- **Line 20:** "with," "will"
- **Line 25:** "'mid," "mighty," "sum"
- **Line 26:** "speaking"
- **Line 28:** "still," "seeking"
- **Line 31:** "sit," "stone"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives this poem's important moments some understated music.

For instance, listen to the assonance in lines 27-28:

> That nothing of itself will come,
> But we must still be seeking?

In line 27, the assonant vowel is a schwa, a neutral /uh/ sound that smooths the line out. That forms a backdrop for the more intense /ee/ sounds of "we must still be seeking."

This mixture of subtle and striking assonance is a perfect tonal fit for the two approaches to wisdom William is comparing here: the gentleness of waiting for knowledge to arrive "of itself" versus the focused intensity of "seeking."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "old," "stone"
- **Line 5:** "bequeathed"
- **Line 6:** "Beings"
- **Line 8:** "dead men"
- **Line 10:** "for," "bore"
- **Line 11:** "were," "first," "birth"
- **Line 20:** "with," "will"
- **Line 23:** "mind"
- **Line 24:** "wise"
- **Line 27:** "nothing," "come"
- **Line 28:** "we," "be seeking"
- **Line 31:** "old," "stone"

VOCABULARY

Bequeathed (Line 5) - Passed down—especially as a legacy from someone who has died.

Else (Line 6) - Otherwise.

Forlorn (Line 6) - Pitifully sad, lonely, and isolated.

The spirit breathed from dead men to their kind (Lines 7-8) - In other words, the wisdom and insight passed down from people who are already dead to people who will one day be dead.

Bore (Line 10) - Gave birth to.

Esthwaite lake (Line 13) - One of the many lakes of England's Lake District, the region where Wordsworth lived and worked during his most productive years.

Spake (Line 15) - Spoke.

Bid the ear be still (Line 18) - In other words, tell the ear to stop hearing.

Where'er (Line 19) - A contraction of "wherever."

Powers which of themselves our minds impress (Lines 21-22) - In other words, forces that independently introduce themselves to us.

'mid (Line 25) - A contraction of "amid," or among.

Wherefore (Line 29) - Why.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Lyrical Ballads," the collection this poem comes from, provides a good hint about this poem's form in its title: this is a ballad, but a lyrical one! That means it's using the ancient, folky ballad shape—originally a narrative, storytelling form—to explore the speaker's inner life, his "lyrical" emotion and thought. Here, the speaker is telling the *story* of the day a friend interrupted his peaceful musings to ask why he wasn't hitting the books, but also communicating the *insights* he gained from merely perching on a stone.

Ballads often use short, punchy four-line stanzas, and this one, with its eight quatrains, is no exception. (The poem does play around with ballad meter in some meaningful ways, though—see the Meter section for more about that.)

This down-to-earth form reflects the poem's themes. Rather than striving for elegant, elevated book-learning, this poem's primary speaker prefers to sit quietly, receiving wisdom from nature rather than striving. His unpretentious form reflects his simple approach.

Readers might also break this poem down into *three* parts: there's a passage of dialogue from Matthew, a stanza of context in William's voice, and then a passage of dialogue from William. In other words, there's an "expostulation" (an explosion of disapproval), an explanation—and then a calm "reply"!

METER

"Expostulation and Reply" uses—for the most part—iambic tetrameter. That means that each line uses four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in lines 17-18:

> "The eye— | it can- | not choose | but see;
> We can- | not bid | the ear | be still;

This simple rhythm is a natural fit for a "lyrical ballad": most ballads use either iambic tetrameter or common meter, a back-and-forth pattern that switches between lines of iambic tetrameter and lines of iambic trimeter (*three* da-DUMs in a row).

But there are many oddities and variations within the meter here to keep readers on their toes. The poem doesn't stick to solid lines of tetrameter all the way through: sometimes a stanza switches to common meter, and sometimes the speaker

just throws in an unexpected line of irregular meter.

Take a look at the sixth stanza, for instance. This passage starts with three solid lines of iambic tetrameter, but ends with the line:

> In a wise passiveness.

This important line, which introduces the very Wordsworthian idea of "wise passiveness," uses an irregular rhythm that appears nowhere else in the poem: an intentional stumbling block that forces readers to spend an extra moment with this mysterious idea, rather than just galloping onward

The poem's startling metrical variations reflect its purposes: this poem is a philosophical debate, and its changing meter helps reader to engage its arguments.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Expostulation and Reply" runs like this throughout:

ABAB

That's no surprise in a poem modeled on the ballad form: most ballad stanzas rhyme either ABAB or ABCB.

What's a little more unusual is the *language* of this speaker's rhyme words. While this poem uses a simple, folksy ballad shape, it's full of sophisticated rhymes: this speaker doesn't just use plain, classic pairs like "alone" and "stone," but rather more elevated ones like "impress" and "passiveness," "bequeathed" and "breathed." That language hints that, in spite of the poem's outward simplicity, there's some complex thought going on here.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is William Wordsworth himself—though the poem begins with a speech from his friend Matthew, a severe-but-idealistic fellow who interrupts Wordsworth's perfectly pleasant daydreaming to encourage him to hit the books.

Wordsworth often wrote first-person poetry in his own voice, casting himself as a wandering philosopher who reflects on the lessons he's learned from nature and childhood. Here, he's treating one of his favorite subjects: the inherent power and wisdom of nature. (In fact, he liked this theme so much that he wrote a companion piece to this poem, a longer reply to Matthew and his ilk in which a speaker declares that a walk in the woods can teach one more than "all the sages can.")

In other words, this speaker seems to be delivering Wordsworth's own philosophy in Wordsworth's own voice. That voice is lyrical, thoughtful, reflective—and maybe a tiny bit grumpy about being interrupted in his contemplation of natural splendor.

But there's also a touch of complex irony here. After all, this speaker's "reply" might advocate for "wise passiveness"—but it's doing so in a poem, in the very kind of book that Matthew encourages William to get up and read!

SETTING

"Expostulation and Reply" has a very specific setting: "Esthwaite lake," one of the many lovely lakes in England's Lake District. Wordsworth and his collaborator Coleridge made this region famous: they lived and worked there in the most creatively fertile years of their lives, and they're still sometimes known as the "Lake Poets."

To the Wordsworth of this poem, this lake seems to be a fountain of wisdom. Perched on a simple "old grey stone," he's content to passively gaze out over the water, waiting for nature to teach him whatever it wants to teach him. That stone, which might come from a fallen wall or a ruined cottage, could even hint that nature doesn't just teach different lessons than humanity: it also outlasts all human endeavor.

For that reason, one might even say the setting is "Mother Earth" herself. The speaker draws his wisdom, not just from a specific view of a specific lake, but from all the "Powers" of the natural world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

While William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is now often seen as the most ubiquitous and canonical of English poets, in his time he was a revolutionary.

In collaboration with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his sister Dorothy Wordsworth, Wordsworth wrote one of the most important books in world literature: *Lyrical Ballads*. This innovative poetry collection, first published in 1798, married the earthy English ballad tradition to deep emotion—and kicked off the English Romantic movement, changing poetry forever.

"Expostulation and Reply," which appeared in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, is a quintessential Romantic poem both in its style and in its themes: the poem's reflections on the wisdom of nature and the value of dreaming are some of the bedrock ideas of Romanticism. And Wordsworth had even more to say on the subject. "The Tables Turned," his sequel to this poem, doubles down on the idea that nature is the wisest teacher there is, arguing that it can teach more "than all the sages can."

Alongside his intimate (and often fraught) collaboration with Coleridge, Wordsworth inspired a whole generation of younger poets—though some of them, like Keats and Byron, were later pretty disappointed with how conservative Wordsworth

became in his older age. (See the painter Benjamin Haydon's account of a legendary and hilariously awkward dinner party with Wordsworth for just one good example.) Once rebellious in both his politics and his poetry, Wordsworth eventually settled into a comfortable retirement as Queen Victoria's Poet Laureate. But the vibrant, soulful poetry of his youth has endured, and he remains one of the best-known and most influential of poets to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth's poetry was part of a Romantic backlash against the elegant, satirical, and often merciless clarity of the Age of Enlightenment. This period of the 18th century was marked by huge scientific advances, but also by what the later Romantics saw as a bit too much reason. Where earlier Renaissance scholars and artists tried to know a little bit about everything, Enlightenment thinkers were categorizers and organizers, increasingly interested in sharp divisions between disciplines.

The art of that era, similarly, had an orderly, reasoned wit that Wordsworth and his followers began to find rather deadening. Romantics like William Blake and John Keats wanted to break out of the crystalline prison of Enlightenment-era poetry, preferring the wide, dark, glimmering world of the imagination. "Expostulation and Reply" is just one example of a Romantic answer to an Enlightenment worldview, arguing for the power of "wise passiveness" over the limitations of human knowledge and human striving.

The Romantic movement was also in part a rebellion against the Industrial Revolution, which was built on the back of Enlightenment advances in science and technology. As the countryside began to disappear beneath expanding cities and filthy factories, thinkers like Wordsworth tried to remind readers that nature was full of irreplaceable beauty and wisdom—qualities that can't be commodified.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem in Context — Watch a short video from the Wordsworth Trust, in which scholar Catherine Kay discusses this poem's relationship to its sister poem, "The Tables Turned." (https://youtu.be/LPanogmy5Dg)
- Wordsworth's World — Learn more about the historical and literary context in which this poem was first published. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2014/08/13/a-new-species-of-poetry-the-making-of-lyrical-ballads/)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Wordsworth's great-great-great-great-grandson giving a lively reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/XoM5ddYsz_w)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Complaint
- A Slumber did my Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

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