

Never To be Decayed: A Study of “The Simplon Pass,” by William Wordsworth

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Crossroads are where two paths converge, creating a meeting point. They are locations that encompass two spheres, belonging not entirely to one or the other. In the poem “The Simplon Pass” by William Wordsworth, the realms of man and nature meet as travellers journey through a mountain pass in Switzerland. Though the pass is not a literal crossroads, it illustrates the crossing of the worlds of man and nature, which then merge together as one. As the travellers move through nature, they observe their surroundings and note the relationship between the various natural occurrences they see. The poet conveys how all elements of nature, even opposing ones, are imbued with a greater sense of divinity. Since the divine is both eternal and unifying, it transforms individual elements of nature as well as man into part of something greater than themselves, which ultimately reveals man’s delusion in seeing himself as separate from the world around him.

Wordsworth’s dynamic diction and use of personification gives the impression that nature is alive. The sense of motion conveyed by the “blasts” (line 6) and “shooting” (9) of water along with the “thwarting” (8) of winds creates a vigorous tone that highlights the liveliness of nature. Wordsworth further emphasizes the energetic atmosphere by noting where the travellers see such commotion—“in the narrow rent” (7)—whose small space is bursting with activity. Even nature’s seemingly less forceful occurrences have a sense of life to them, which Wordsworth conveys through his personification of the rock faces. Wordsworth details how “The rocks that muttered” emitted only quiet murmurs but still “spake... As if a voice were in them” (10-12), thereby portraying the rocks as having the human-like power of speech and capacity for communication. Considering that the rocks “[mutter] close

This paper was written for Maren Adler’s Advanced Placement English Literature class in the spring of 2017.

upon [the travellers'] ears" (10), they appear to be communicating to man, permeating his space as they make their "voice" heard.

More specifically, Wordsworth's vibrant imagery illuminates the chaos present in nature. For instance, when illustrating the "blasts of water-falls" (6), Wordsworth emphasizes the water's violent and explosive nature by describing its motion as "blasts." Water's strength is also apparent in the "torrents shooting from the... sky" (9), whose sudden and forceful movements reinforce the element's power. Other elements are also depicted as carrying great force; for instance, Wordsworth details the "Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn" (8), distinguishing between "winds" and "winds bewildered and forlorn" to suggest a differentiation among winds by their varying degrees of power. By contrasting the more powerful gales with the "forlorn" winds, which stand little chance against their stronger counterparts, Wordsworth paints a powerful picture of nature battling against itself. The description of these winds as "bewildered," which connotes disorientation, adds to the sense of chaos amidst the fighting. Further illustrating the sky, Wordsworth also describes "The unfettered clouds" (14), whose lack of restraint indicates nature's sense of release in its actions. The clouds' freedom from constraint amplifies the urgency in the water's movements and intensity of the winds' clash, all of which contribute to a sense of upheaval as nature unleashes its wrath. In fact, the description of the "raving stream" (13), which connotes madness, further supports the notion of nature as unhinged and to a certain extent even dangerous.

However, there are also undertones of peace in nature that contrast its chaos. For example, Wordsworth juxtaposes the harsh, mighty movements of water with its softer flows by depicting the "drizzling crags" (11), whose surfaces have been delicately sprayed with light rain. By giving an example of how water moves gently in addition to forcefully, Wordsworth reveals the dual nature of the element. Such duality exists not only within elements but also across natural forces; for example, Wordsworth's explanation of how "The rocks... muttered" (10) when they appeared to speak underlines their soft tone of voice, which diverges from the force and vigor exhibited by the water and the winds. At times, dual forces of nature seem to contradict one another; for instance,

Wordsworth uses an oxymoron in describing the “blasts of waterfalls” as “stationary” (6), whose implied stillness conflicts with the sudden motion indicated by “blasts.” Similarly, Wordsworth explains that the “torrents” that shoot through the air come from “the clear blue sky” (9), whose calm atmosphere seems an unlikely source for the stormy outbursts. Though the untroubled sky seems detached from the violent rain, the fact that one actually stems from the other indicates that they are ultimately connected. Thus Wordsworth’s contradictory language mirrors the mechanisms of the natural world; on the surface nature appears at odds with itself, but underlyingly its forces work together.

Wordsworth explicates the relationship between various natural occurrences by elaborating on the unity in nature. When summarizing the various natural phenomena the travellers see, Wordsworth acknowledges the conflicting elements of nature—the “Tumult and peace” and “the darkness and the light” (15)—but contends that they “Were like the workings of one mind” (16), thereby indicating the unity and interconnection between the opposing forces. Since separate elements of nature are like “features of the same face” and “blossoms upon one tree” (16-17), they serve as smaller pieces that together make up a larger whole, despite the fact that they individually conflict with one another. The repetition of the word “one” reinforces the unity of nature, which is more largely reflected in the poem’s structure. All one stanza, Wordsworth arranges the poem’s lines together as one, and with no rhyme scheme, he doesn’t group any lines together to set them apart from the rest. Instead, all of the lines meld together, echoing the harmony of nature. In fact, as Wordsworth outlines the various natural occurrences the travellers see, he writes one sentence spanning seventeen lines (which is one of only two sentences in the twenty line poem, the first of which only provides context for the poem) that also mirrors the oneness of the natural world.

In particular, an overarching divine presence connects opposing facets of nature. By illustrating nature’s liveliness and giving nature a “voice” (12) and “mind” (16), Wordsworth suggests a godlike power and will behind the “workings of” (16) nature. However, Wordsworth deliberately leaves the “voice” and “mind” of nature unnamed, which suggests

that the power and will manifested in nature extends beyond that of one conception of the divine and more largely refers to a greater sense of divinity imbued in the natural world. Such divinity is most apparent in the outpour from “the sky” (9), which connotes divine power from above, and “region of the heavens” (14) that converges with the earth, signaling the infusion of the divine into the natural world. However, the vibrancy the travellers see “at every turn” (7) reflects such divinity’s all-pervading embodiment in nature. It encompasses both peace and chaos, and its greatness makes for the “sick sight / And giddy prospect” of nature, in this case illustrated by the “raving stream” (12-13). The alliteration and enjambment of the word “sight” emphasizes the sublimity of nature, which is “giddy” in the sense that it is both terrifying and exciting, yet another way in which nature is twofold.

Also related to nature’s grandeur is its eternity, which Wordsworth illustrates through his sweeping diction and imagery. For example, Wordsworth highlights the “immeasurable height” (4) of the trees in the forest, suggesting that they are so vast and monumental that their stature is beyond human comprehension. The enjambment of the word “height” reinforces how the trees appear infinite, seeming to reach into the sky forever. Such limitlessness is also apparent in “The unfettered clouds” (14), whose unrestrained powers mirror the unboundedness of the trees. Wordsworth also notes that these “woods” are “decaying” (5), conveying that they deteriorate like all other living things. However, he elaborates that they are “never to be decayed” (5), which suggests that nature works in cycles, dying and regenerating so as to maintain itself. By outlining what nature is “never to be,” Wordsworth establishes that nature is “without end” (20) and will continue to live on as time progresses, allowing it to last enduringly.

Nature’s eternity also stems from its divinity. Though the absence of the word “God” indicates a universal divinity as opposed to one embodiment of the notion of the divine, Wordsworth’s description of these natural occurrences as those “Of first and last” (20) alludes to the Judeo-Christian notion of God as the Alpha and Omega. By referencing a moment in which God declares himself to be the beginning and the end, Wordsworth highlights the eternity and ever-present nature of the divine. Wordsworth elaborates that these natural occurrences

of “Of first and last” also encompass those of “midst” (20), blurring them together to convey the divine’s constancy throughout time. By explicitly referring to the various natural occurrences the travellers see as “The types and symbols of Eternity” (19), Wordsworth reveals how the essence of nature makes it imperishable. Though nature’s cycles most literally keep it alive, the divinity imbued in the natural world also gives nature its lasting existence. Since the divinity in nature remains even as nature physically decays, individual elements of nature are eternalized by the divine, making each natural occurrence enlarged by the greater complex of divinity it is entwined into.

Moreover, the fact that of all the travellers, it is the poet who illuminates nature’s sublimity reveals the poet’s capacity for heightened evaluation of the world around him. In declaring that nature is “never to be decayed” (5), the poet not only proclaims nature’s eternity but also expresses his transcendent view of nature. Though others perceive nature simply to be “decaying” (5), visualizing nature as earthly and impermanent, the poet understands nature as mystical and everlasting, signifying more than its physical composition. The poet’s ability to loosen his mind’s restraints allows him to see nature’s endlessness, making the poem a reflection of nature’s “voice” (12) and “mind” (16) as much as the poet’s. Since the poet’s magnified imagination allows for the interplay between fantasy and reality, it also contributes to the poem’s self-contradictions, making the poem at times seem inconsistent and implausible. For example, in describing elements of nature as “Characters of the great Apocalypse” (18), Wordsworth paints a dramatic picture of the final destruction of the world, transforming his seemingly ordinary surroundings into a greater, symbolic event. However, this “Apocalypse” contrasts the notion of “Eternity” (19) mentioned in the following line, whose everlastingness seems at odds with the end of the world. These contradictory notions of endings and eternity reflect the heightened state of the poet’s imagination in which such conflict naturally occurs; as the poet’s feelings spontaneously overflow, there are clashing emotions and ideas, just like there are contradictions inherent in nature itself. However, even with such opposition, there is overlap—there is a sense of eternity to the final destruction of the world, a permanence to its complete demolition. Moreover, other interpretations of the “Apocalypse” support the sense

of divinity and eternity expressed in nature. For example, the “Apocalypse” may refer to The Book of Revelation, which is the last book of the New Testament. If elements of nature are “Characters” in the Bible, they are agents of God as well as the models we study in order to understand the relationship between God and man, which conveys how nature is holy and acts as a medium through which God reveals himself to man. More broadly, the connotations of uncovering and revelation associated with the word “Apocalypse” suggest a divine revelation, which can apply to a greater sense of divinity that extends beyond the Judeo-Christian conception of the divine recorded in the Bible.

Though the poet’s exceptional vision distinguishes him from the common man, ultimately all men and nature are connected. By calling “Brook and road... fellow-travellers” (1-2), Wordsworth portrays the stream and road as the travellers’ companions in the pass. The stream, whose water connotes life and rebirth, and the road, whose soil brings to mind similar notions of fertility, convey how nature is a source of life. Also related to the notion of God as the Alpha and the Omega, the divine is the foundation upon which all things are created, which gives all elements of creation—both man and nature—the same beginning. Considering that the travellers move “with them” (3), which refers to the “Brook and road,” man and nature are in sync with one another, united by their common roots and continuing their journey together along these paths. Because they are both “workings of” (16) the divine, man and nature are a both part of the same system, their worlds melded together rather than set apart.

Altogether, “The Simplon Pass” suggests that no matter how detached man seems from his surroundings, he is ultimately connected to the world around him. Through nature’s harmony, Wordsworth reveals that forces of nature which appear to conflict with one another are underlyingly united; for man, this paradox more largely reflects that in spite of his belief that he is separate from the natural world, he is in fact a part of the unity among nature and the greater meaning it embodies. The sublimity of the natural world that the poet expresses man being part of signals man’s arrogance in valuing his individual life and foolishness in separating himself from something so grand and

magnificent. Though man's individual existence is finite, the natural world he is ingrained in is everlasting. Only by magnifying his emotions and heightening his imagination does the poet convey the truth about man's existence, thereby opening his mind in order to see greater meaning in his surroundings. The poet embraces nature's duality and contradictions, which create nature's greatness rather than defining its differences. In taking a step back and looking at his surroundings from a broader, more comprehensive perspective, the poet gains a greater understanding of the world around him. For the common man, his consciousness is limited in his black and white distinction between himself and his surroundings, which creates a false disconnect he deludes himself into believing. ●

The Simplon Pass

By William Wordsworth

—Brook and road

Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy Pass,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow step. The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent, at every turn,
Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end.

Bibliography

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