

The Boat Stealing Episode of Wordsworth

This is a piece of poetry about Wordsworth's childhood. In the extract the young Wordsworth takes a boat, without permission, for a row on Ullswater at night. His feelings of guilt summon up a vision of the mountain opposite looming out of the darkness as if to punish him. Although Wordsworth quickly returns the boat, he is haunted for many nights by the memory.

The extract comes from Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. There are many manuscripts of the poem and this lesson concentrates on investigating three of them: the earliest (1799), the earliest complete version of the whole 13 Book poem (1805) and the first published version after the poet's death in 14 Books (1850). The earliest version in manuscript is held in MS JJ.

William Wordsworth's "Boat Stealing" episode in *The Prelude*, explores his experience stealing a boat in his younger years. The passage shows examples of romanticism through language, scenery and imagery. Wordsworth also shows a change in his own character from the beginning of the episode to the end. He describes his feelings during the event and how they changed him afterward.

Wordsworth begins with, "One Summer evening (led by her) I found a little boat" (357). He claims to have been led by "her" which refers to nature. He describes the boat as being tied to a "willow tree within a rocky cave"(Line 358), where it usually resided. He gives the imagery of the boats first movements into water and then its flow into a steady pace by saying "small circles glittering idly in the moon until it all melted into one track of sparkling light (Lines 365-366)." He also describes his actions as "troubled pleasure", meaning that although they were wrong he received pleasure in stealing. Wordsworth presents himself as being a gleeful child, while essentially committing crime.

Wordsworth then goes on to describe his view of the stars above him and his focus on a craggy ridge. He uses the word "lustily" when writing about dipping the oars into the lake, making his experience with the lake a romantic one. Wordsworth describes his oar strokes in the lake as "heaving through the water like a swan"(Line 374), giving the reader the peaceful image of him gliding smoothly through the water. This again produces a romantic image of the swan sailing through water. Then suddenly the tone of the passage changes and William comes in contact with a huge dark figure that comes between him and his view of the stars. The image was actually caused by a change in view of the ridge, but to young William it was as if a monster or creature had been coming for him. The figure sent him soaring back to the willow tree to return the boat. After the episode, Wordsworth says "in grave and serious mood; but after I had seen that spectacle, for many days my brain worked with dim and undetermined sense of unknown being, o'er my thoughts there hung darkness"(Line 393), he had fallen into a depression of sorts, and was haunted by images of dark mighty figures that erased all the peaceful images of greenery that he had in his mind before. Possibly Williams conscience caused him to think that the ridge was actually something else coming for me, because he knew he had been guilty of stealing.

Wordsworth often refers to objects or nature as a she or her. For instance, he refers to the boat as her when he says "I unloosed her chain"(Line 360) and refers again to it as she when he says "she was an Elfin pinnacle"(Line 373). Wordsworth even begins the poem with "One evening led by her" (Line 357), referring to nature as a her. By using a pronoun for nature, he is beginning the poem with a romantic essence.

In the beginning of the piece, Wordsworth's younger self is adventurous and eager to explore the lake. He appears carefree, and content. Once the shadow appears, fear and fright take over his previous mellow attitude. In the days following the event, Wordsworth remains terrified and fearful of the unknown. Of his new feelings he writes, "No familiar shapes remained, no pleasant images of trees, of the sea or sky, no colours of green fields; but huge and mighty forms, that do not live"(Lines 395-398) The peaceful and romantic feelings of the poem and in Wordsworth himself, disappeared. He progressed from a lively, excited boat thief to a weary zombie like individual.