Close analysis of the poem 'Intimations of Immortality' by William Wordsworth

**Task: What comes before (and after)?**

- Do you think there is anything before, and after, life?
- Do our souls exist prior to our physical being and do they extend beyond death?
- What would you like to believe, even if you do not think it is so?
- Would experience pre-life be the same as post-life?

Summarise your thoughts either through image/annotation or through description in the boxes below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-life</th>
<th>Post-life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Task: Understanding pre-existence**

Pre-existence, before life, or pre-mortal existence refers to the belief that each individual human soul existed before mortal conception, and at some point before birth enters or is placed into the body.

The concept is usually denied by Christians, but acknowledged by Islam and also in some Ancient Greek thinking.


Wordsworth explores the concept of pre-existence in his poem ‘Intimations of Immortality.’ When discussing the poem, he commented:

‘It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith, as more than an element in our instincts of immortality. But let us bear in mind that, though the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing there 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; and, among all persons acquainted with classic literature, is known as an ingredient in Platonic philosophy. Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a point whereon to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same aspirations as regards the world of his own mind? Having to wield some of its elements when I was impelled to write this poem on the ‘Immortality of the Soul,’ I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorising me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet.’
Close analysis of the poem ‘Intimations of Immortality’ by William Wordsworth

Task: The seven ages of man

What happens to us as we age? How does our view of the world change? Summarise your ideas around the timeline below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth</th>
<th>Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Now, read Shakespeare’s famous speech from As You Like It which explores the concept of ageing. What does he suggest?

ALL the world ’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His Acts being seven ages. At first the Infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.
Then the whining School-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the Lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a Soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard;
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the Justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances,—
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered Pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion,—
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.
Close analysis of the poem
‘Intimations of Immortality’ by William Wordsworth

**Task: Key quotations and summaries**

Consider the following key quotations and the summaries of content/meaning. One has been taken from each stanza of the poem. Link them and then, using Abrams’ suggested structure of the ‘Greater Romantic Lyric’, see if you can put these quotations in order as you think they will appear in the poem. Alternatively, you could categorise them into a, b and c (see below)

Greater Romantic Lyric Structure (M.H. Abrams):

- a. a description of landscape promotes wider thoughts
- b. as a result of his contemplation, the speaker ‘achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem’
- c. a return to the landscape, often with a changed mood or deeper perspective than at the start

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza number / GRL category</th>
<th>Key quotation</th>
<th>Summary of content/meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>’Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?’</td>
<td>The speaker acknowledges that we cannot go back to the way he felt in childhood; he will instead gain pleasure and strength from appreciating nature in a new way.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Though nothing can bring back the hour Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower; We will grieve not, rather find Strength in what remains behind’</td>
<td>Despite abundant beauty in nature, the speaker still feels something is amiss / no longer holds the magic it did in the past.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’Forget the glories he hath known, And that imperial palace whence he came’</td>
<td>The speaker introduces the concept of pre-existing, that as we are with God before we are physically part of the world, in our early days we view the world as splendorous as our memory of being with God casts a brilliance upon the world.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The earth, and every common sight, To me did seem Apparel’d in celestial light’</td>
<td>The speaker develops the idea of children wanting to grow up too soon, questioning why they would want to experience the burdens of adulthood so quickly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Close analysis of the poem

‘Intimations of Immortality’ by William Wordsworth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza number / GRL category</th>
<th>Key quotation</th>
<th>Summary of content/meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke The years to bring the inevitable yoke, Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife? Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight’</td>
<td>The speaker almost berates himself for thinking negatively. If nature is a kind of religion, it is wrong to be unhappy in its midst.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘To me the meanest flower that blows can give Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.’</td>
<td>As a child, we often spend our time wishing to grow up and mimicking adult behaviour (when we should be in no hurry).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep; No more shall grief of mine the season wrong; I hear the echoes through the mountains throng, The winds come to me from the fields of sleep’</td>
<td>The speaker’s mood fluctuates back to the feeling that something is different/lost. He questions where the magnificence of the landscape has gone once again.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Hence in a season of calm weather Though inland far we be, Our souls have sight of that immortal sea Which brought us hither’</td>
<td>The idea that our memories of childhood will always allow us access to the innocence and wondertment of childhood is introduced.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘But trailing clouds of glory do we come From God, who is our home: Heaven lies about us in our infancy!’</td>
<td>The speaker contemplates how the earth is dreamlike and almost heavenly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Close analysis of the poem
‘Intimations of Immortality’ by William Wordsworth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza number / GRL category</th>
<th>Key quotation</th>
<th>Summary of content/meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘But yet I know, where'er I go</td>
<td>‘But yet I know, where'er I go That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth’</td>
<td>The speaker reflects that as we grow up and experience earthly pleasures, we forget the wonder of pre-existence and our earliest days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘As if his whole vocation</td>
<td>‘As if his whole vocation Were endless imitation.’</td>
<td>The speaker concludes by considering that there is power within nature to inspire thought and emotion because we can see aspects of humanity within it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Task: Developing analysis of language**

Choose a stanza and answer the questions below to develop your understanding of Wordsworth’s crafting of the poem.

1. Which word choices within your stanza highlight the beauty and magnificence of nature?
2. Which word choices within your stanza imply the speaker’s deep thought and contemplation?
3. Which words or phrases might link to some of Wordsworth’s important themes within this poem - childhood, memory, ageing and pre-existence?
4. Does Wordsworth employ the five senses or any imagery (simile, metaphor, personification) to help explore his ideas? If so, analyse two examples within your stanza.
5. How would you describe the tone within your stanza? Give reasons for your choice.
6. Do you feel Wordsworth is manipulating the structure of lines, sentences or punctuation in order to add emphasis to some of the main ideas within your stanza?

**Task: Evaluation and comparison**

Consider the two poems ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’ and ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ alongside ‘Intimations’. Which poem do you think most effectively explores the impact of the landscape on spirituality / the human mind?

Give reasons for your decision.