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Works Cited

Soule, George. "The Tables Turned." *Masterplots II: Poetry, Revised Edition*, Jan. 2002, pp. 1–2.
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The Tables Turned**William Wordsworth**

Born: April 7, 1770; Cockermouth, Cumberland, England

Died: April 23, 1850; Rydal Mount, Westmorland, England

Quick Reference

First published: 1798, in *Lyrical Ballads*

Type of poem: Lyric

The Poem

"The Tables Turned" is subtitled "An Evening Scene on the Same Subject," indicating that it forms a pair with the poem published immediately ahead of it in *Lyrical Ballads*, "Expostulation and Reply." A reader should understand one to understand the other.

In "Expostulation and Reply," William Wordsworth's friend Matthew, finding the poet sitting on a stone, urges him to quit dreaming and to read those books through which the wisdom of the past sheds essential light on the problems of the present. William replies that while he sits quietly, he feels the force of "Powers" which give his mind a "wise passiveness." By implication, this passiveness is more precious than the knowledge that can be gained by reading.

"The Tables Turned" is a short lyric poem of thirty-two lines arranged in eight stanzas. It takes the form of an address by a speaker (who most readers will agree is Wordsworth himself) to a

friend, the Matthew of "Expostulation and Reply." The scene is presumably that of the other poem ("by Esthwaite lake") in England's Lake District; by its subtitle, "An Evening Scene on the Same Subject," one may assume that the events of the poem take place later in the same day.

Wordsworth metaphorically turns the tables on his friend, for this time it is Wordsworth who makes the confrontation. The poet's general argument has not changed: The mind is much better off when it responds to the influences of nature than when it takes on intellectual tasks. The central concern of the poem is to develop this contrast and this argument.

In stanza 1, Wordsworth forcefully yet playfully urges Matthew to stand "Up! up!" lest he "grow double" in the "toil and trouble" of reading. In stanza 2, the poet paints a picture of the glories to be seen in nature as the sun appears above a mountain and gives the "long green fields" their "sweet evening yellow." From stanza 3 on, nature is embodied specifically in the sounds of birdcalls in the woods — the music of the linnet and the "blithe" song of the thrush (or thrush).

Wordsworth is interested in more than simply giving the reader specific images of nature, however; most of the poem is given over to an argument. The "dull and endless strife" of reading books, the preachers' wisdom they contain, and even the "ready wealth" they may bring are not so sweet and wise as a bird's song. The argument becomes more intense in stanzas 7 and 8, where the poet's objections to books widen to include most kinds of knowledge found in books, especially that "barren" knowledge which comes from rational (perhaps scientific) analysis, by which "Our meddling intellect/ Misshapes the beauteous forms of things — / We murder to dissect."

In contrast, Wordsworth urges Matthew, "Let Nature be your teacher" by responding to bird songs, by deriving "Spontaneous wisdom" from them in a state, not of dull toil, but of "health" and "cheerfulness." The poet states his program for wisdom in stanza 6: "One impulse from a vernal wood/ May teach you more of man,/ Of moral evil and of good,/ Than all the sages can." Because this is so, Wordsworth ends his poem in stanza 8 by calling on his friend to "come forth" from his books with an alert heart ready to receive nature's lessons.

Forms and Devices

"The Tables Turned" contains eight quatrains of a specific kind; they are "ballad stanzas." Such a stanza generally has four lines of alternately eight and six syllables, which rhyme abab. Many of the poems published in *Lyrical Ballads* are written in this kind of verse. This was the stanza in which many folk ballads were composed, so to choose to write in it signaled that a poet was departing from the usual poetic form of the eighteenth century, the heroic couplet.

The poem begins playfully. The poet remonstrates with Matthew, calling forth a fanciful image of his friend's growing double over his books with a witty implication that he is behaving like, and perhaps coming to resemble, the witches in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), with his "toil and trouble." The next three or four stanzas are also light in mood. The poet

continues to use the imperative voice to call upon his friend to come away from books, and he uses most of the poem's vivid visual images in so doing. Most of the poem's few metaphors (bird as preacher, nature as teacher) occur in stanza 4. In each, the amount of semi-serious and abstract assertion increases: from none in stanza 2 to almost all of stanza 5.

In the climax of the poem, stanzas 6 and 7, the reader finds almost no images, no metaphors. The poet is serious, not urgent or playful. Stanza 6 states the positive side of Wordsworth's argument. Its language has a grand and prophetic simplicity; its rhythm is appropriately regular and calmly emphatic. Stanza 7 states the negative: It is more cacophonous, irregular in rhythm, and polysyllabic than stanza 6. Its final line ("We murder to dissect") is the poem's most forceful in meaning and most dramatic in presentation. The poem ends on a somewhat less intense but hopeful note, as it returns to the imperative to call Matthew forth and to define how he will attain the insights the poet has described.

Themes and Meanings

When Wordsworth chose to employ the ballad stanza, he not only broke with the poetic practice of serious English poetry of the past, he also implied that he held new values. If those values were not (at least in this poem) the values of common folk, they were at least quite different from those common to educated persons in the eighteenth century.

Matthew, the representative of older values, has been identified in part with William Taylor, Wordsworth's boyhood schoolmaster. Wordsworth once said that this and the poem that preceded it "arose out of conversation with a friend" (possibly William Hazlitt) "who was somewhat unreasonably attached to modern books of Moral Philosophy."

It is precisely the kind of ideas about moral philosophy found in books that Wordsworth attacks in this poem. In the all-important sixth stanza, Wordsworth asserts that when a person is affected by a perception of beauty in the natural world in springtime ("an impulse from a vernal wood" — a bird song), that person is made immediately and intuitively sensitive to what is good and what is evil. This kind of moral intuition is more to be trusted than judgments made on the bases of philosophical systems.

The seventh stanza describes what such systems do. They reject what can be learned from the pleasing ("sweet") impulses of nature ("the lore which Nature brings"). Instead, these systems encourage the mind ("Our meddling intellect") to analyze ("dissect") the "beauteous forms of things." This last phrase is somewhat vague; presumably the mind attempts to analyze not only the beautiful impulses from nature but human actions as well. In either case, before the mind can analyze, it must kill: "We murder to dissect." The action of the logical mind destroys what it touches and defeats its own purpose of discovering moral principles.

Wordsworth criticizes how the logical mind operates upon moral questions. Some readers also take the powerful statements in stanza 7 to apply to the analytical mind in all of its operations. Although elsewhere he expresses different opinions, here Wordsworth seems to

have much in common with other Romantic poets, who generally valued imaginative understanding much higher than logical and rational thought.

Essay by: George Soule

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