***Boat Stealing* an extract from *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth**

GCSE video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D87M_pIcj8s>

A level video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwSpu3e7cpE>

University Course Intro <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/william-wordsworth/1/steps/45736>

**Biographical Context**

**William Wordsworth** (1770-1850) is one of the most famous poets in the history of English Literature. He was born in Cockermouth in Cumbria, part of the region commonly known as the Lake District, and his birthplace had a huge influence on his writing. He spent time with his grandparents who lived in nearby Penrith, an even wilder and more rugged place.

*The Prelude* is seen as one of the greatest works of literature ever written in English. It is a long *autobiographical* poem in 14 sections. The first version was written in 1798 but he continued to work on it throughout his lifetime. His wife Mary published it three months after his death in 1850.

The poem shows the **spiritual growth of the poet**, how he comes to terms with who he is, and his place in nature and the world. Wordsworth was inspired by memories of events and visits to different places, explaining how they affected him. He described *The Prelude* as "a poem on the growth of my own mind" with "contrasting views of Man, Nature, and Society".

This extract describes how Wordsworth went out in a boat on a lake at night. He was alone and a mountain peak loomed over him; its presence had a great effect and for days afterwards he was troubled by the experience.

**Literary Context: The Romantics / Romanticism**

Romanticism is a term used to describe developments in literature, art and music in the late 18th and early 19th century. Some key Romantic ideas include a focus on the power of nature, imagination, revolution, the world of children and the lives of people marginalised in society. Romanticism has been very influential and important British Romantic poets include Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Blake. Wordsworth’s epic poem *The Prelude* is packed with images of natural, rural beauty. Observing Wordsworth’s focus on nature as part of a Romantic tradition helps us see how the poem is about the link between humans and nature.

**Form**

The Prelude can definitely be viewed as an epic poem, in length at least. Epics are very long pieces of writing that usually deal with exciting, action-packed heroic events like wars or explorations. Although many of the events Wordsworth writes about are 'ordinary' they are given an epic quality, to fully describe the impact they had on his life. This is an extract of 44 lines written in *blank verse*.

**Structure**

There are no *stanzas*: the writing is continuous though there is plenty of punctuation to help us read it. **This extract is a complete story in itself.** It starts with "One summer evening..." and finishes with the effects on his mind of the boat trip: "a trouble to my dreams".

**Sound**

The Prelude is conversational, as if Wordsworth is sat next to us, telling us the story himself. The poet uses "and"s throughout to give the verse a breathless quality. Listen carefully next time someone tells you a story: there will be lots of 'and's used.

**Imagery**

Wordsworth effectively describes the night-time atmosphere with his choice of images:

*Small circles glittering idly in the moon, Until they melted all into one track Of sparkling light.*

But gentle moonlight becomes darkness as the poet-narrator's state of mind becomes troubled by the end of the extract:

...*o'er my thoughts There hung a darkness, call it solitude Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes Remained, no pleasant images of trees, Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;*

This is imagery that could be associated with **gothic (sinister or grotesque) tales, nightmares or even horror.** Wordsworth continues with this imagery:

*But huge and mighty forms, that do not live Like living men, moved slowly through the mind By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.*

**Personification** is also used by Wordsworth: he refers to Nature as "her" leading him on and the mountain peak comes alive and chases him:

...*a huge peak, black and huge, As if with voluntary power instinct, Upreared its head...For so it seemed, with purpose of its own And measured motion like a living thing*,

**Attitudes and ideas**

**Wordsworth does not view humanity as having authority over nature.** If anything, it's the other way round as we can see from his description of the huge mountain. Wordsworth also realises that once an event has happened, that doesn't mean it's over; the effect stayed with him for days afterwards.

**Themes**

**Nature**: humanity is part of nature and sometimes we can be made to feel very small and insignificant by the natural world.

**Loneliness**: Wordsworth is often on his own throughout The Prelude and this is important to him. He can think more clearly and is more affected by events and places as a result.

**The night**: the poem seems to suggest that you can sometimes experience feelings and events more clearly at night, perhaps due to loneliness.