



# Extract from **The Prelude** KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



**Context** – *The Prelude* was originally written in 1798, but was frequently rewritten and published in 1850.

**William Wordsworth** – William Wordsworth (1812-1889) is one of the most famous poets in English Literature. He was born and raised in the Lake District, a beautiful natural area of the UK which clearly influenced the subject matter and themes in his writing. After living in France for a while, returning, and then marrying, Wordsworth was made the Poet Laureate. In 1847, after the death of his daughter, Wordsworth was said to be so upset that he could no longer write poetry. He died in 1850.



**Romanticism** – Romanticism was an artistic, literary, musical, cultural and intellectual movement that originated in Europe in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In most areas it peaked in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Romanticism is characterised by its emphasis on emotions, as well as glorifying nature and past events – memories and settings are often colourfully described. It was partially in response to the scientific rationalisation of nature of the era.



**Writing the Prelude** – Wordsworth began writing *The Prelude* in 1798, after experiencing homesickness when in Germany. It is a long autobiographical poem that is written in 14 books. It was not published until shortly after his death, in 1850. The poet uses childhood memories to share his quest for understanding in life. This extract in particular refers to a childhood memory in which he commandeers a boat before realising the magnitude and power of nature around him.



**The Title** – The full title of the poem is *The Prelude: Growth of a Poet's Mind*. The poem endeavours to do exactly as its subtitle implies, with each section roughly corresponding to a section in his poetic development. Wordsworth himself likened *The Prelude* to a Gothic cathedral, explaining (in another of his texts, *The Excursion*) that the poem was like 'an antechapel through which the reader might pass' in order to gain access to the main body of his work.



## Language/Structural Devices

**Imagery** – Wordsworth uses vivid imagery to create the night-time atmosphere throughout the opening of the extract, using vocabulary associated with peace to describe the tranquil natural phenomena. For example, words such as 'stealth', 'idly', and 'glistening' paint a quiet, peaceful scene in the mind of the reader. This is at odds with the sinister, almost gothic-like imagery that is created in the second half of the poem through vocabulary such as 'grave', 'black' and 'grim.'

**Personification** – In order to demonstrate the sheer power of nature throughout the poem, Wordsworth chooses to personify several aspects of nature at different points in the extract. For example, it is initially inferred that nature itself (she) guided him to take the boat that evening. Later on in the poem, the mountain peak that so terrifies the speaker is heavily personified, for e.g. through the terms 'voluntary power instinct' and 'upreared its head' – giving it purpose.

**Quote:** "Small circles glittering idly in the moon/  
Until they melted all into one track."

**Quote:** "As if with voluntary power instinct,  
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,"

**Alliteration** – The repetition of particular sounds is used effectively by Wordsworth to evoke both tone and atmosphere at different points in the poem. For example, the frequent use of soft 'l' and 'm' sounds at the beginning of the poem (leaving, glittering, light, like) create a feeling of tranquility and peacefulness. This is in contrast to the ominous 'd' sound (days, dim, darkness) that dominates later.

**Similes/Metaphors** – Wordsworth also uses a number of figurative language techniques to paint a precise image in the mind of the reader, which alters as the tone of the poem changes. For example, the boat is initially described as being like a graceful 'swan', as the speaker is content and peaceful. Later, when feeling far more vulnerable, the speaker describes their vessel as simply being 'bark.'

**Quote:** "That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense"

**Quote:** "And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat  
Went heaving through the water like a swan;"

**Structure** – There are no stanzas throughout the extract, yet Wordsworth opts to use lots of punctuation to clarify meanings and enable the reader to separate ideas. The extract is like a complete story in itself, in that it starts with 'one summer evening' and ends with the effect of the action 'trouble to my dreams.' The repeated use of 'and' throughout the poem gives it a spoken feel, like someone telling a story.

**Oxymoron** – An oxymoron is used in line six as the speaker states 'it was an act of stealth, and troubled pleasure.' Pleasure is usually something to be enjoyed, whilst someone that is 'troubled' is tormented to the degree that they cannot take pleasure from something. Whilst the boy does take pleasure from taking the boat, it is implied that he cannot enjoy it fully, for some kind of underlying fear.

**Quote:** "Like living men, moved slowly through the mind  
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams"

**Quote:** "Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth  
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice"

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Nature** – As the speaker realises in this extract from *The Prelude*, humanity is only one part of nature. The natural world can make man feel extremely small and insignificant. The speaker feels power after taking the boat and directing it as he pleases, but is soon levelled by the power of nature (in the form of a large mountain).



**Loneliness** – Throughout large sections of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth is often on his own, and he makes it clear that this is important to him. He is able to think more clearly when he is alone, and is more affected by experiences and places. In this sense, a more spiritual and mystical atmosphere is created through the idea of loneliness.



## Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	One summer evening (led by her) I found	<b>Lines 1-10</b> – Wordsworth immediately personifies nature as her – stating that nature itself was guiding him. The little boat seems to symbolise a vessel for the emotional, spiritual journey that he is on. As he 'unlooses' the boat, he is setting his imagination free. The speaker then opens themselves to all that nature has to offer, with Wordsworth using vivid imagery to describe its wonders. There is alliteration of soft 'l' and 'm' sounds, reflecting the serenity. The oxymoron 'troubled pleasure' suggests conflicted emotions – nature shows pure beauty but also power.
	2	A little boat tied to a willow tree	
	3	Within a rocky cove, its usual home.	
	4	Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in	
	5	Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth	
	6	And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice	
	7	Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;	
	8	Leaving behind her still, on either side,	
	9	Small circles glittering idly in the moon,	
	10	Until they melted all into one track	
	11	Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,	<b>Lines 11-20</b> – The speaker at this point is sure of his destination – the words 'chosen', 'fixed', and 'unswerving' demonstrate this sense of purpose and direction, whilst the 'horizon' represents the ultimate destination as a poet. The mention of the stars, with all their celestial beauty, and the use of the adjective 'elfin', however, point towards something more powerful and mystical. The simile comparing the boat to a swan signifies the beauty and elegance with which it moves through the water. This is a tranquil and beautiful image of nature.
	12	Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point	
	13	With an unswerving line, I fixed my view	
	14	Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,	
	15	The horizon's utmost boundary; far above	
	16	Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.	
	17	She was an elfin pinnace; lustily	
	18	I dipped my oars into the silent lake,	
	19	And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat	
	20	Went heaving through the water like a swan;	
	21	When, from behind that craggy steep till then	<b>Lines 21-28</b> – There is a drastic shift in tone, when the speaker encounters a beast of nature that he can only describe as 'black' and 'huge.' There is repetition of the word 'huge' to emphasise its size, but also to mimic the boy's stumbling fear. The peak is heavily personified, for example the suggestion that it has a 'purpose', as if it is bringing some kind of message or intent towards him and that it 'upreared its head' and was 'growing.' The separation it creates between him and the stars represents the idea that nature is standing between him and the divine – it appears stronger than him.
	22	The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,	
	23	As if with voluntary power instinct,	
	24	Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,	
	25	And growing still in stature the grim shape	
	26	Towered up between me and the stars, and still,	
	27	For so it seemed, with purpose of its own	
	28	And measured motion like a living thing,	
	29	Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,	
	30	And through the silent water stole my way	
	31	Back to the covert of the willow tree;	<b>Lines 29-37</b> – The speaker turns back for the willow tree with 'trembling oars', demonstrating his pure anxiety. The boat is now described as 'bark', which makes it seem more fragile than before – a perception influenced by the speaker's fear. At the beginning of the poem man is painted as being at one with nature, but it seems as though here he has realised that nature also has a great many dangers, and should be feared. The vocabulary used e.g. 'dim' and 'grave' give a sense of foreboding.
	32	There in her mooring-place I left my bark, -	
	33	And through the meadows homeward went, in grave	
	34	And serious mood; but after I had seen	
	35	That spectacle, for many days, my brain	
	36	Worked with a dim and undetermined sense	
	37	Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts	
	38	There hung a darkness, call it solitude	
	39	Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes	
	40	Remained, no pleasant images of trees,	
	41	Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;	<b>Lines 38-44</b> – The final lines reveal the lasting effect that this experience has had on the speaker. What had used to be 'familiar' and 'pleasant' was now 'darkness' and 'solitude', as he realised that he could not control nature, and that the world around him was more dangerous than he had known. The use of the terms 'huge' and 'mighty' show that he now saw nature as a greater power; 'do not live' gives the impression that these powers are immortal. The speaker's mindset was forever altered.
	42	But huge and mighty forms, that do not live	
	43	Like living men, moved slowly through the mind	
	44	By day, and were a trouble to my dreams	

## Poems for Comparison

Exposure	Influences on the Poet
<i>The Prelude</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem through its presentation of nature.	Many of Wordsworth's poems were influenced by his sister Dorothy, whose journal he liked to read. For example: "When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the waterside. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. These beautiful descriptions of the natural surroundings were imitated in sections of Wordsworth's poems, for example 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' and 'The Prelude.'
<i>The Prelude</i> can be compared and contrasted with these poems through its presentation of loneliness.	