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Wordsworth and the Environmental Humanities: Reimagining Nature as Teacher in the Age of Climate Change and Artificial Intelligence

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Email: aishwaryasingh2101@gmail.com**Abstract**

This article reconsiders William Wordsworth's poetry through the interdisciplinary lens of the Environmental Humanities, asking how his conception of nature as a formative teacher might speak to an age marked by climate change and artificial intelligence. It argues that Wordsworth's natural world is neither a passive backdrop nor merely an object of aesthetic contemplation; it is an active presence that educates perception, cultivates emotional awareness, and deepens ethical responsibility. Through close textual analysis of *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, *The Tables Turned*, *The World Is Too Much with Us*, and selected passages from *The Prelude*, the study examines how observation, memory, affect, and embodied encounter generate an ecological mode of knowing. The article addresses a gap in scholarship by bringing Wordsworth's pedagogical understanding of nature into sustained dialogue with contemporary debates on technological mediation, climate consciousness, and more-than-human ethics. It further considers the implications of this Romantic ecological imagination for environmental education and sustainable futures. Ultimately, the study suggests that Wordsworth offers not a nostalgic retreat from technology but a critical resource for rethinking human–nature relations in an increasingly AI-mediated world.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Climate Change, Environmental Ethics, Environmental Humanities, Sustainable Futures

Introduction

The accelerating realities of climate change have transformed environmental concerns from scientific debates into urgent ethical, cultural, and literary questions. At the same time, the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence has reshaped how knowledge is produced, accessed, and experienced. These parallel developments have encouraged scholars in the Environmental Humanities to reconsider literary

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traditions that imagine alternative relationships between human beings and the natural world. Within this intellectual context, the poetry of William Wordsworth acquires renewed significance. His poems do not merely celebrate natural beauty; they investigate how sustained engagement with nature cultivates perception, moral awareness, emotional resilience, and ecological responsibility. Read from the perspective of Environmental Humanities, Wordsworth's work offers an enduring model of environmental learning that remains relevant in an era increasingly defined by ecological instability and technological mediation.

This article argues that Wordsworth presents nature as an active teacher whose influence extends beyond aesthetic pleasure into the formation of ethical consciousness. Such an understanding emerges not through abstract philosophical claims but through carefully constructed poetic experiences. Close attention to imagery, memory, rhythm, and reflective narration reveals that nature in Wordsworth's poetry functions as a living presence capable of transforming the individual's relationship with both the self and the wider world. Consequently, his ecological vision anticipates many of the concerns that occupy contemporary environmental thought, including ecological interdependence, environmental responsibility, and the consequences of human estrangement from nature.

The discussion develops through close textual readings of *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, *The Tables Turned*, *The World Is Too Much with Us*, and selected passages from *The Prelude*. Rather than treating these poems as isolated expressions of Romantic sensibility, the study examines them as interconnected reflections on ecological learning and human development. Each text illuminates a different dimension of Wordsworth's environmental imagination, from contemplative memory and experiential knowledge to critiques of materialism and the restorative power of the natural world.

The article further places these literary insights in conversation with current debates surrounding climate change and artificial intelligence. Such a dialogue does not suggest that Romantic poetry provides direct solutions to contemporary environmental crises. Contemporary ecocritical scholarship further argues that the Anthropocene has fundamentally altered the relationship between humans and the environment, making ecological responsibility a central concern of literary studies (Clark). Instead, it demonstrates how literary texts preserve ethical modes of attention that remain essential when technological progress increasingly mediates human experience. By bringing Wordsworth into conversation with Environmental Humanities, this study highlights the continuing capacity of Romantic literature to deepen ecological awareness and to reimagine the educational relationship between humanity and the more-than-human world (Wordsworth, *The Major Works*; Lawrence Buell; Timothy Morton).

Research Gap

Although Wordsworth's poetry has been extensively examined through Romanticism, ecocriticism, and environmental thought, existing scholarship has largely concentrated on his celebration of nature, ecological consciousness, and critique of industrial modernity. Comparatively less attention has been given to the pedagogical dimension of his environmental imagination: the ways in which encounters with the non-human world actively produce knowledge, reshape perception, and cultivate ethical dispositions. More significantly, Wordsworth's conception of nature as a formative teacher has rarely been placed in sustained conversation with the contemporary conditions of climate change and artificial intelligence, where technological mediation increasingly influences how humans perceive, learn from, and relate to the world beyond themselves. This study addresses that critical gap by bringing Wordsworth's poetry into dialogue with the Environmental Humanities, particularly debates concerning more-than-human agency, ecological ethics, embodied knowledge, and

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technological mediation. Through close readings of *Tintern Abbey*, *The Tables Turned*, *The World Is Too Much with Us*, and *The Prelude*, it investigates whether Wordsworth's Romantic pedagogy of nature can offer more than historical insight—whether it can provide a critical vocabulary for reconsidering environmental learning, human–nature relations, and sustainable futures in an AI-mediated age.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and text-centred research methodology grounded in close reading and interdisciplinary literary analysis. Its primary corpus comprises William Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, *The Tables Turned*, *The World Is Too Much with Us*, and selected passages from *The Prelude*. These texts are examined not simply as representations of landscape but as sites where perception, memory, embodiment, and ethical consciousness are shaped through encounters with the more-than-human world. The analysis attends closely to diction, imagery, metaphor, speakerly reflection, temporal movement, and the interaction between human consciousness and environmental presence.

The study is situated within the Environmental Humanities and draws selectively on ecocritical approaches to nature, material agency, ecological ethics, and more-than-human relations. Rather than imposing contemporary ecological concepts retrospectively upon Romantic poetry, the analysis places Wordsworth's own pedagogical conception of nature in productive dialogue with present debates on climate change, environmental education, and artificial intelligence. AI functions here as a contemporary condition of technological mediation rather than as a direct object of literary comparison. This methodological move enables the study to identify both continuities and tensions between Romantic embodied knowledge and increasingly mediated forms of perception. The approach ultimately combines historical sensitivity with contemporary critical inquiry, allowing Wordsworth's ecological imagination to be reassessed without reducing its complexity to present-day environmental discourse.

Nature as Teacher: A Close Reading of *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*

Among William Wordsworth's major poems, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* provides the clearest expression of his belief that nature functions as an enduring teacher rather than a passive landscape. The poem records the poet's return to the Wye Valley after five years, yet its central concern is not physical travel. Instead, it traces the gradual education of perception. Wordsworth suggests that encounters with the natural world reshape memory, deepen moral awareness, and transform the way human beings understand themselves. Read through the lens of Environmental Humanities, the poem proposes an ecological model of learning in which knowledge emerges from sustained attention to the more-than-human world rather than from abstract intellectual systems.

The opening movement establishes the importance of memory. The landscape has remained alive in the speaker's consciousness during his absence, continuing to influence his emotional and ethical life. Nature therefore exists not merely as an external object but as an active presence carried within memory. This continuity challenges the assumption that learning occurs only through formal instruction. Instead, Wordsworth presents recollection itself as an ecological practice through which the human mind preserves its relationship with place. The remembered landscape becomes a source of inward renewal that continues to shape the speaker's moral imagination long after the immediate experience has passed (Wordsworth, lines 22–49).

The poem also marks a significant shift in the speaker's understanding of nature. He reflects that he has "learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth" (Wordsworth, lines 89–91). Rather than presenting this change as a loss, Wordsworth interprets it as intellectual and ethical

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growth. The passionate immediacy of youth gradually develops into a more reflective relationship with the natural world. Nature is no longer valued simply because it delights the senses; it becomes a medium through which the speaker recognizes "the still, sad music of humanity" (lines 91–95). This movement from sensation to reflection is central to Wordsworth's ecological philosophy because it demonstrates that environmental awareness requires maturity, self-examination, and sympathy rather than mere admiration of scenic beauty.

Wordsworth's environmental imagination reaches its philosophical height when he describes nature as "the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being" (lines 109–11). These carefully chosen metaphors deserve close attention. An anchor provides stability; a nurse nurtures growth; a guide directs judgment; and a guardian protects what is ethically valuable. Together, these images redefine education itself. Nature does not simply provide information about the external world. It cultivates moral discernment, emotional balance, and responsible perception. The poem therefore rejects any understanding of nature as a resource existing solely for human use. Instead, it imagines a reciprocal relationship in which human identity is formed through continuous participation in the living world. This interpretation resonates with material ecocriticism, which views the natural world as an active participant in shaping human experience rather than a passive backdrop (Iovino and Oppermann).

This educational vision becomes even more significant in the closing address to Dorothy. Wordsworth expresses confidence that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" (lines 122–23). The statement should not be read as naïve optimism. Rather, it reflects the poet's conviction that faithful attention to nature cultivates resilience, ethical judgment, and hope even amid suffering. The relationship between human beings and the natural world is presented as reciprocal: love produces attentiveness, and attentiveness makes ecological wisdom possible. In contemporary Environmental Humanities, such reciprocity continues to inform discussions of ecological ethics, place-based learning, and environmental responsibility.

When viewed from the perspective of the twenty-first century, Tintern Abbey acquires renewed relevance. Climate change and technologically mediated lifestyles increasingly distance individuals from direct experience of the natural world. Wordsworth's poem responds to this condition by insisting that genuine knowledge cannot be separated from lived encounters with place. Ecological responsibility begins with perception before it develops into action. By presenting nature as a lifelong teacher, Tintern Abbey offers not a nostalgic retreat from modernity but an ethical framework through which environmental consciousness may be renewed. In this sense, the poem continues to speak powerfully to contemporary debates within the Environmental Humanities, reminding readers that the education of perception remains inseparable from the future of ecological care.

Ecological Pedagogy: A Close Reading of *The Tables Turned* and *The Prelude*

If Tintern Abbey presents nature as the source of moral reflection, *The Tables Turned* advances the argument further by portraying nature as a living educator whose lessons exceed those offered by conventional forms of learning. Rather than dismissing knowledge itself, Wordsworth questions an educational model that privileges abstract reasoning while neglecting lived experience. Read through the framework of Environmental Humanities, the poem proposes an ecological pedagogy in which learning emerges from attentive participation in the natural world. Such a vision remains significant today, when technological mediation increasingly distances human beings from direct encounters with their environments.

The poem opens with an urgent invitation: "Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books" (Wordsworth, lines 1–4). This imperative immediately establishes a contrast between enclosed

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intellectual labour and the openness of the natural world. The command is not anti-intellectual. Instead, it challenges an educational system that mistakes accumulated information for genuine understanding. Wordsworth suggests that learning becomes incomplete when it is separated from observation, sensation, and emotional responsiveness. The opposition between the study room and the living landscape therefore symbolizes two different ways of knowing: one mediated primarily through texts and the other through experience.

The poem's most memorable declaration—"Come forth into the light of things, / Let Nature be your teacher" (lines 15–16)—forms the philosophical centre of Wordsworth's ecological vision. Nature is personified as a teacher not because it delivers formal instruction but because it cultivates habits of perception that no institutional curriculum can fully provide. The metaphor of "light" operates on two levels. Literally, it refers to the physical world illuminated by evening sunlight. Figuratively, it signifies intellectual and ethical awakening. Wordsworth thus associates knowledge with openness, receptivity, and attentive presence rather than with detached accumulation of facts. Environmental Humanities similarly emphasizes that ecological understanding depends upon sustained relationships with places, species, and landscapes rather than purely abstract environmental information (Buell).

Wordsworth strengthens this argument by asserting that "One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can" (lines 21–24). These lines deserve careful attention because they redefine both morality and education. The phrase "vernal wood" evokes renewal, growth, and seasonal transformation, suggesting that ethical insight develops through participation in natural processes. Rather than rejecting philosophy, the poem argues that moral understanding remains incomplete if it is detached from the living world. Human character is therefore educated through ecological experience as much as through intellectual inquiry. Such an argument anticipates contemporary discussions of place-based education, which recognize that environmental responsibility grows from direct engagement with local ecosystems rather than from theoretical knowledge alone.

The closing stanza presents one of Wordsworth's most enduring critiques of excessive rationalism: "Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;— / We murder to dissect" (lines 25–27). These lines should not be interpreted as a rejection of science itself. Instead, they criticize forms of analysis that fragment living reality into isolated objects while overlooking the relationships that sustain ecological life. The striking verb "murder" exposes the violence implicit in modes of knowledge that reduce nature to something merely observable, measurable, or exploitable. Wordsworth therefore anticipates a central concern of contemporary Environmental Humanities: the need to balance scientific knowledge with ethical imagination, emotional attentiveness, and ecological humility. His criticism remains particularly relevant in an age when technological systems increasingly mediate human experience of the natural world.

The Prelude: Imagination, Childhood, and Ecological Learning

While *The Tables Turned* urges readers to step beyond the classroom and rediscover the living world, *The Prelude* demonstrates how that education unfolds across an entire lifetime. As a poetic autobiography, the work traces the gradual growth of the poet's mind through sustained encounters with rivers, mountains, forests, and open landscapes. Nature is not presented as a picturesque setting for personal reflection. It actively shapes perception, disciplines emotion, and enlarges the imagination. From the perspective of Environmental Humanities, *The Prelude* suggests that ecological consciousness develops through long-term relationships with place rather than through detached observation or abstract knowledge.

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Wordsworth repeatedly returns to childhood because he regards it as the period in which the human mind remains most receptive to the formative influence of nature. The Derwent River, surrounding hills, and rural landscape become silent companions in the child's development, creating what the poet later recognises as an enduring moral education. Reflecting on these early experiences, he recalls how the river's continuous presence gradually "compos'd my thoughts" and awakened an awareness of the calm that nature breathes through the landscape (Wordsworth, Book 1). The passage suggests that education begins long before formal instruction. Ecological understanding first emerges through repeated sensory encounters that quietly shape memory, feeling, and judgment.

Equally significant is Wordsworth's treatment of imagination. Unlike reason, which often separates and classifies, imagination establishes relationships between the self and the more-than-human world. The poem repeatedly illustrates that mountains, rivers, wind, and silence are not passive objects awaiting human interpretation. They become active participants in the formation of consciousness. Even experiences that initially evoke fear—such as the famous boat-stealing episode and the overwhelming appearance of the towering cliff—ultimately deepen the speaker's humility rather than affirm human mastery. Nature educates by confronting the individual with realities that exceed personal control, encouraging intellectual modesty alongside emotional maturity.

This movement from youthful excitement to reflective understanding parallels the ecological ethics that inform contemporary Environmental Humanities. Lawrence Buell argues that environmental thought requires renewed attentiveness to the reciprocal relationship between human beings and the natural world rather than the assumption of human dominance (Buell). Wordsworth anticipates this ecological insight by portraying nature as an active formative force—one that nurtures moral awareness and shapes human character rather than reducing the non-human world to a resource for human consumption. Knowledge, therefore, becomes relational rather than possessive. Ecological learning depends upon participation, patience, and memory.

Read together, *The Tables Turned* and *The Prelude* articulate a coherent philosophy of education. The former rejects the illusion that books alone can cultivate wisdom, while the latter demonstrates how a lifetime of attentive engagement with nature refines imagination, ethical judgment, and self-understanding. Their shared argument remains remarkably relevant in the twenty-first century. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence have transformed access to information, yet they cannot replace the embodied experiences through which ecological responsibility develops. Wordsworth's poetry therefore distinguishes between acquiring information and becoming wise. The first may be accelerated by technology; the second still depends upon sustained encounters with the living world. By placing imagination, memory, and direct experience at the centre of education, *The Prelude* extends Wordsworth's vision of nature as teacher into a comprehensive philosophy of ecological learning that continues to inform contemporary Environmental Humanities.

Reimagining Wordsworth in the Age of Climate Change and Artificial Intelligence

The environmental concerns that define the twenty-first century extend far beyond the historical circumstances of William Wordsworth's Romantic age. Climate change, biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, rapid urbanisation, and the emergence of artificial intelligence have fundamentally altered the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Yet Wordsworth's poetry continues to speak powerfully to these conditions because its central concern is not the prediction of future crises but the cultivation of an ecological way of seeing. Read through the perspective of Environmental Humanities, his poems suggest that environmental problems are never purely scientific. They are equally moral, cultural, and imaginative, demanding a transformation in the way people perceive and inhabit the earth (Buell). Recent scholarship has further strengthened this connection between Romantic

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literature and contemporary climate discourse. Anne Collett and Olivia Murphy argue that Romantic writing provides important imaginative resources for understanding environmental instability and the cultural meanings of climate change. Rather than treating Romantic poetry as historically distant, they demonstrate that it continues to illuminate present-day ecological concerns and the ethical challenges posed by environmental catastrophe (Collett and Murphy). Reading Wordsworth today therefore requires attention to what Timothy Clark identifies as the altered ecological conditions of the Anthropocene (Clark).

Across *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, *The Tables Turned*, *The Prelude*, and *The World Is Too Much with Us*, Wordsworth repeatedly argues that the deterioration of the natural world begins with a deterioration of human perception. In *The World Is Too Much with Us*, the poet laments that "getting and spending" has distanced humanity from nature, reducing the environment to an object of economic value rather than a living presence deserving respect (Wordsworth, lines 1–4). Wordsworth's critique of excessive acquisition anticipates what Rob Nixon later conceptualises as the slow and often invisible environmental damage generated by modern systems of economic development (Nixon). Similarly, *The Tables Turned* urges the reader to "Come forth into the light of things" and to "Let Nature be your teacher," presenting direct experience as the foundation of genuine wisdom (Wordsworth, lines 15–16). These poems collectively suggest that ecological responsibility develops through sustained attention rather than through information alone. Environmental Humanities reinforces this insight by examining how cultural values influence environmental behaviour and by encouraging more ethical relationships between human and non-human life (Glotfelty and Fromm).

The emergence of artificial intelligence further complicates this debate, introducing new questions about how technology mediates human perception, knowledge, and our relationship with the natural world. AI has transformed education, scientific research, environmental monitoring, and climate modelling, making complex information available with remarkable speed. These developments have undeniable value. Digital technologies now assist researchers in tracking biodiversity, modelling climate patterns, and analysing environmental change with a level of precision unimaginable in Wordsworth's time. As Ursula K. Heise argues, contemporary environmental thought increasingly negotiates the relationship between ecological responsibility and global technological change (Heise). Nevertheless, Wordsworth's poetry reminds readers that information and wisdom are fundamentally different forms of knowledge. Data can explain ecological processes, but it cannot cultivate wonder, empathy, or moral responsibility. Those qualities emerge through lived encounters with landscapes, memory, imagination, and reflective experience. In this respect, Wordsworth does not oppose technology; rather, he challenges the assumption that technological advancement alone can resolve ecological crises (McKusick).

Lawrence Buell argues that environmental criticism must move beyond viewing nature as a passive background and instead recognise the complex relationships connecting literature, culture, and ecological systems (Buell). Wordsworth's poetry anticipates this perspective by presenting nature as an active participant in human intellectual and ethical development. His landscapes educate, challenge, console, and occasionally unsettle the individual. Mountains, rivers, forests, and open skies are never decorative details. They function as moral agents that shape perception and deepen self-understanding. Jonathan Bate likewise demonstrates that Romantic poetry re-establishes the cultural significance of the natural world by resisting purely utilitarian attitudes towards the environment (Bate). Read together, these critical perspectives illuminate the continuing relevance of Wordsworth's ecological imagination.

This relevance becomes even more apparent in an era dominated by digital technologies. Artificial intelligence has undoubtedly expanded access to knowledge, but it has also intensified forms

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of mediated experience that often separate people from direct engagement with the natural environment. Wordsworth's poetry offers a necessary balance. He neither rejects scientific progress nor advocates a nostalgic return to the past. Instead, he imagines a model of progress in which technological innovation is guided by ethical reflection, ecological responsibility, and cultural humility. Climate change demands scientific expertise, yet scientific solutions become sustainable only when they are accompanied by transformed habits of perception and care. Wordsworth therefore reminds contemporary readers that environmental renewal begins not only with innovation but also with imagination.

Ultimately, Wordsworth's vision of nature as teacher continues to enrich contemporary Environmental Humanities because it reconnects knowledge with responsibility, perception with empathy, and imagination with ecological action. His poetry encourages readers to recognise that meaningful environmental change requires more than technological efficiency. It requires renewed attentiveness to the living world and a willingness to acknowledge humanity's place within, rather than above, the larger community of life. In the age of climate change and artificial intelligence, this Romantic insight remains both intellectually compelling and ethically urgent.

Conclusion

William Wordsworth's poetry offers a distinctive ecological vision in which nature is not merely a physical environment but a formative presence that shapes human perception, imagination, and ethical understanding. Through poems such as *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, *The Tables Turned*, *The Prelude*, and *The World Is Too Much with Us*, Wordsworth repeatedly challenges the separation between human life and the natural world. His poetry suggests that environmental awareness begins with a transformation of consciousness—with the ability to observe, value, and respond to the living systems that surround us.

The reading of these poems through the framework of Environmental Humanities reveals that Wordsworth's concern extends beyond Romantic appreciation of landscape. His work questions the cultural assumptions that encourage domination, excessive consumption, and emotional distance from nature. In *The Tables Turned*, nature becomes a source of wisdom that challenges purely intellectual forms of learning, while *The Prelude* presents ecological experience as central to the development of imagination and moral character. Similarly, *The World Is Too Much with Us* exposes the consequences of a society governed by material desire and disconnected from ecological relationships. Together, these poems construct an alternative philosophy of knowledge in which experience, memory, and environmental attentiveness become essential forms of understanding.

In the context of contemporary climate change and artificial intelligence, Wordsworth's ecological imagination acquires renewed significance. Technological advancement has expanded human capacity to collect and process information, yet ecological crises demonstrate that knowledge alone cannot guarantee responsible action. Wordsworth reminds us that environmental responsibility also requires empathy, humility, and a meaningful relationship with the more-than-human world. His poetry does not oppose scientific progress; rather, it calls for a form of progress guided by ethical reflection and ecological awareness.

Ultimately, Wordsworth's enduring contribution lies in his recognition that the crisis of nature is also a crisis of perception. Before humanity can restore damaged ecosystems, it must reconsider the values and attitudes that shape its relationship with the earth. In an age defined by climate uncertainty and technological transformation, Wordsworth's vision of nature as teacher remains a powerful intellectual resource. His poetry continues to demonstrate that ecological survival depends not only on what humans know, but also on how deeply they learn to care for the world they inhabit. Consequently,

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Wordsworth's ecological vision continues to speak not only to Romantic studies but also to contemporary debates within Environmental Humanities and Anthropocene criticism (Clark; Heise).

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