

## **“The Homely Nurse Doth All She Can”: Gender And Personification In *Ode: Intimations Of Immortality From Recollections Of Early Childhood***

Rebekkah (Frisch) McKalsen  
English  
Wells College  
170 Main Street  
Aurora, New York 13069 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Catherine Burroughs

### **Abstract**

The greater Romantic lyric, defined by M. H. Abrams in his famous essay, “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” (printed in The Correspondent Breeze, 1984), is a poetic form following a three-part structure: the speaker describes a landscape or specific objects in a natural environment, sparking a “process of memory, thought... and feeling” (The Correspondent Breeze 77) tied to the outer scene. The speaker comes to a moral decision, faces tragedy, or achieves insight, then the poem “rounds upon itself” (77) to end where it began, altered by the speaker’s change. Given the normative gender relations of the 1790s (established by Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*), I argue that the diction in Wordsworth’s famous greater Romantic lyric, *Intimations Ode* (1807), creates an inversion of those relations: the personified Earth changes the spiritual nature of the masculine Child into a more pragmatic one like that of the feminine Earth, during which process the Child loses his spiritual immortality. I contextualize my close reading of the poem in terms of both contemporary scholarship (none of which addresses personification’s function in the ode) and Wordsworth’s literary polemics in his “Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*” (1802). Because Wordsworth states therein his aim is to “adopt the very language of real men” and thus avoid personification in poetry (Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period 297), his characterization of an agential Earth in *Intimations Ode* not only contradicts his theory but also engages with early nineteenth-century proto-feminist debates about women in order to suggest a gendered and unsolved divide between immortality of the body and the soul.

**Keywords: Wordsworth, Personification, Gender**

### **1. Introduction**

Indeed, one sometimes has an impression in reading Wordsworth – an impression so contrary to his overt intentions and obiter dicta and so significant for later poetry – that man is a brief appearance on the surface, a kind of fungus momentarily clinging to the bleak, immutable rocks.<sup>1</sup>

In William Wordsworth’s *Intimations of Immortality*, Earth is personified as a woman who aims to make “Man” forget about his pre-life existence in “imperial palace[s].”<sup>2</sup> The poem, which was written between 1802 and 1804, shows a female Earth exerting agency and change upon the Child, who is described in masculine terms. This paper explores the relationship between Man and the Earth as an inversion of the typical male/female power dynamics of the early nineteenth century and what these inverted dynamics say about the varying attitudes the Child holds as opposed to the Man. Given that the poem illustrates Man’s ultimate changeability (insofar as Man is changed by a feminine character such as the Earth), the speaker’s portrayal of the relationship between Man and the Earth as

inverted demonstrates how Man's (as well as the speaker's) awareness of immortality changes as he ages – as shown by Man only having the “glory” of immortality as a child – to mirror the values and realities of the Earth.

## 2. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gender Relations

A working definition must be given for the “typical power dynamics” between men and women of the time before exploring the idea of its inversion. Considering that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written in 1792, this is a good work to examine for understanding the expectations set up for women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Wollstonecraft reveals much to modern readers when she says, “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.”<sup>5</sup>

Another point that Wollstonecraft makes is in reference to the state of women's education; she compares women to “flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, [their] strength and usefulness ... sacrificed to beauty” and, according to Wollstonecraft, this “barren blooming” is due in part to a “false system of education, gathered from the books written ... by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than ... rational mothers.”<sup>4</sup> Here, the reader can again see that the “woman” of Wollstonecraft's time was neither prepared for nor expected to be rational and, in fact, woman was often treated as a sort of subhuman creature whose main goal in life was to be beautiful. This can also be observed in the language of Wollstonecraft's metaphor: woman is merely a passive plant tended to by a man.

How does this understanding of nineteenth century male/female dynamics add to an understanding of Wordsworth's feminine Earth and masculine Child? The Earth, as implicitly described through aspects of nature in *Intimations of Immortality*, is “lovely,”<sup>5</sup> “beautiful and fair,”<sup>6</sup> and Earth “herself is adorning, / This sweet May-morning.”<sup>7</sup> The Earth of *Intimations of Immortality* is valued by the speaker of the poem for her beauty and similarly delights in it herself. This concern with the temporary reflects Earth's vanity and a lack of the speaker's concern that “there hath past away a glory from the earth;”<sup>8</sup> the description also reflects the kind of education that Wollstonecraft described as being available to woman because beauty is stressed over intellectual connections with the masculine characters in the poem.

## 3. Agency & Personification

Because of the expectations Wollstonecraft discussed and the Earth's seeming accordance with many of these expectations, readers might expect the Earth to be acted upon by the human Child, who is described in masculine pronouns, correlating with the gender dynamics found in Wollstonecraft's essay. This is not the case, however. Components of nature such as the birds that “thus sing a joyous song” and the lambs who “bound” in lines 19 and 20 are still celebrating in exactly the same way near the close of the ode in lines 168 and 169. Nature is also used to talk about immortality; in lines 163-4, the speaker mentions the “immortal sea/ Which brought us hither” from the “imperial palaces” before Earth. Not only is the Child unable to change the Earth, but Earth changes the Child, as in the following passage:

The homely Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,  
Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came.<sup>9</sup>

The language in these lines is very action-based: the Earth “does” everything to “make” men forget. The word “make” has a connotation of force here: Earth is the one in charge. This language is reinforced by the labels given to Earth as opposed to Man; a “Nurse” is “a woman employed or trained to take charge of a young child or children. Formerly also: a foster-father.” Even though being a child's nurse is a stereotypically female job during this time, the job enables the Earth to take charge of the figure of the Man in the ode, allowing her to exercise agency over him. A nurse is also “a person who or thing which nurtures or cares for others;”<sup>10</sup> even in her atypical role, Wordsworth's Earth is essentially feminine according to the stereotypes of the time.

Indeed, the Earth is atypical not only as a feminine character with agency, but also as a personified character in Wordsworth. Going back to the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which was written in 1802 (the same year that

Wordsworth began composing *Intimations of Immortality*), Wordsworth himself says, “I have wished to keep my reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him.”<sup>11</sup> The poet rejected personification because to him, the device did not echo the “real language of men”<sup>12</sup> that he believed was so important. Geoffrey H. Hartman agreed that personification in Wordsworth was worth discussing when he censured the critic Riffaterre’s analysis of Wordsworth’s poem “Yew-Trees” for failing to “remark how unusual personification is in Wordsworth, how his literary polemic is against it.”<sup>13</sup>

Why then, did Wordsworth break his own “literary polemic” by personifying the Earth in *Intimations of Immortality*? M. H. Abrams discusses Wordsworth’s use of personification in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, saying, “In his discussion of the style of valid poetry, Wordsworth took special exception to ... personifications ... a ‘mechanical device of style,’ except (this, as always, is his ruling sanction) as they are ‘occasionally prompted by passion.’”<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth spent two years writing the poem, which embodies his belief presented in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*:

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.<sup>15</sup>

And so, readers can see that the personification was carefully planned out due to his passion for the themes and ideas behind the poem. Within the ode itself, the rhetorical device allows the Earth to have more active agency than if Wordsworth had treated it merely as an impersonal pile of dirt, as when the Earth “fills her lap with pleasures of her own” or in the lines where Earth “doth all she can/ To make”<sup>16</sup> men forget, as previously discussed.

The Moon, closely associated with the Earth, actively treats the bare heavens as evocative of beauty instead of the loss that the speaker feels when she “with delight” notices the bare heavens in line 12, only three lines after the speaker notes, “The things which I have seen I now can see no more.”<sup>17</sup> This difference in attitudes is not due to the Earth being unaware of what Man is lost; instead, it is the result of the more pragmatic values that the character of the Earth holds as opposed to Man – values that Man eventually adopts. For example, the bare heavens allow the Moon to be more clearly seen by Earth and Man than a cloudy sky and so for the Moon, the empty heavens cause “delight.” The differing values can also be seen in the following lines:

[T]here hath past away a glory from the earth.  
Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,  
And while the young lambs bound  
As to the tabor’s sound,  
To me alone there came a thought of grief:  
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,  
And I again am strong:  
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;  
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong.<sup>18</sup>

The speaker notices that something glorious in his eyes passes away and instead of the Earth being similarly upset, she rejoices, as demonstrated by the birds and lambs singing and dancing. A cataract is defined as “a waterfall; properly one of considerable size, and falling headlong over a precipice.”<sup>19</sup> The water rushing from the waterfall, instead of being taken as a metaphor for tears and grief, opposes the speaker’s feelings by blowing “trumpets” to create music for the singing and dancing animals. Due to the emphasis that the Earth gives to active celebration after the speaker notices the “glory” has passed away, the speaker feels his grief is misplaced in the season of happiness and, after a “timely utterance” relieves his grief, determines to be stronger and happier like the Earth – this is the first place in the poem where the Earth’s influence over Man’s adaption is shown.

#### 4. Natural Vs. Spiritual

Over the course of the ode, the speaker details the gradual change from the Child who has immortality in some sense to the Man who does not. In lines 119-121, the Child’s immortality “broods like the Day, a master o’er a Slave.” While Wordsworth was not arguing that the Child was going to live forever, the language denotes, along with the descriptions of the life the Child has before birth, a belief in the immortality of the soul. This is a belief Wordsworth

himself was convinced of by the end of 1804, as David Ferry points out when he quotes Wordsworth as saying that the impressions of death that come with growing are “counteracted by those communications with our internal Being, which are anterior to all these experiences.”<sup>20</sup> Ferry argues that *Intimations to Immortality* is the product of the change in Wordsworth’s beliefs from a secular hopelessness in any life after the grave to the Christian faith’s certainty in the soul’s immortality (Wordsworth converted to Christianity in 1804, the year he finished writing *Intimations to Immortality*).

Immortality of the soul as opposed to the mortality of the human body in the ode is delineated by Ferry as the difference between the “natural man” and the “spiritual man,” which difference speaks of the dualism Ferry believes lies behind the poem. According to Ferry, the poem is “about the exchange of one sort of power for another – and perhaps more important, about the exchange of one attitude of life for another.”<sup>21</sup> Ferry shows that the poem struggles to come to “a new principle of unity” that will direct the processes of “both spiritual and natural orders”<sup>22</sup> which represent the attitudes of the spiritual Child and the naturally-minded Man. The author does not, however, see the process as ending with a resolution of that struggle:

But given the character of the poem’s ... acute polarization of sensory and spiritual knowledge, there seems little likelihood that the adult mind, confined as it is within the limits of sense, can cross this barrier and perceive a unity determined by the primacy of spirit.<sup>23</sup>

Ferry makes his argument in the terms of auditory and visual language within the ode, and I have argued the Man’s change in attitudes are a result of his relationship with the Earth and the language associated with the Earth as opposed to Man. Regardless of how it is examined, this change in attitudes represents a shift from the more spiritual manner of the Child to a more “natural,” Earth-like manner of being that does not allow for the same relationship with immortality that the Child enjoys.

A more direct way that this change can be observed is when the speaker describes clouds in lines 190-191 that “do take a sober colouring from an eye/ That hath kept watch o’er man’s mortality.” His description comes from a much different perspective than when the speaker thinks of being a baby who is “trailing clouds of glory” in line 64. The speaker’s attitude has changed to be much more in line with the Moon’s implicit attitude towards clouds in lines 12-13: “The Moon doth with delight/ Look round her when the heavens are bare.” Lack of clouds causes the Moon, which is closely associated with the Earth, delight; thus, the “sober colouring” of the clouds due to their association with man’s mortality in the speaker’s eyes raises interesting parallels in attitude that extend further than a mere account of the clouds.

The example of the clouds highlights that the speaker takes more care to watch over the mortality of his body than he does to take care of the immortality of his soul as he ages. In order to explore this, the poem must be examined as a greater romantic lyric in which, according to M. H. Abrams (who defined the form),

The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.<sup>24</sup>

*Intimations of Immortality* is a greater romantic lyric that comes back to the outer scene at the end with a consolation for what the speaker lost. Before stating the consolation, the speaker says, “Nothing can bring back the hour/ Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;”<sup>25</sup> However, in the beginning of the poem, the glory lay not in flowers but in the Child. In fact, in lines 54-55, the speaker walks through a field and finds, “The pansy at my feet/ Doth the same tale repeat” – a tale of the glory that is lost. So by the end of the ode, the flower no longer speaks mockingly of the glory lost, but represents the glory itself; the form of greater romantic lyric, then, does much to highlight the change in attitude that the speaker undergoes as a result of growing up on the Earth.

The consolation for the speaker, which is stated after the reversal of the role of flowers (but is still roughly twenty lines before the reversal of the image of clouds), is finding strength in, among other things, “the faith that looks through death,/ In years that bring the philosophic mind.”<sup>26</sup> Although “faith that looks through death” indicates a faith in the immortality of the soul, the expression of “faith” sounds much more tenuous than the immortality of the

Child, which is a “Presence which is not to be put by.”<sup>27</sup> Ferry agrees, saying, “It is evident in the assignment of spiritual priorities that what is lost far outweighs what is retained.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, while the speaker tries to find comfort in what “remains behind,” something that he cannot replace has been lost forever as a result of being changed by the Earth.

## 5. Conclusion

The speaker is presented as being even more like the Earth after the statement of the consolation, in the final stanza of the ode. In this closing stanza, Earth and Man seem to almost have switched places when the speaker declares, “The innocent brightness of a new-born Day/ Is lovely yet.”<sup>29</sup> This puts the Earth in the place of a child, and the speaker talks of himself unlike he previously had of Man, who was described as a “Foster-child” to the “Nurse” of the Earth. Instead, the speaker portrays himself as an aging person who loves the brooks “[e]ven more than when I tripped lightly as they.”<sup>30</sup> The brooks also “fret”<sup>31</sup> like the Child, who was “[f]retted by sallies of his mother’s kisses” in line 88, suggesting the Earth has either become more similar to the Child or that the speaker at least perceives an increased similarity because of the change in the speaker.

The seeming adaptability of the Man to the Earth recalls Wordsworth’s discussion of the poet in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*; “He considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other.”<sup>32</sup> In *Intimations of Immortality*, the Earth, with “no unworthy aim,”<sup>33</sup> molds men to become better-suited to her “natural” yearnings and then the speaker discusses the same aspects of the Earth that have always been present in the poem (and thus evoke the immortality the Man has lost) but sees them as being more similar to himself. The speaker, after identifying himself with the Man, loses the sense of immortality that the Earth comes to embody, which also suggests, as in the shift in the last stanza, that the speaker and the Earth have somehow switched places in the speaker’s mind. Although the Earth does not change over the course of the ode, the character of Man, to whom the speaker likens himself, changes in significant ways to become more like the practically-minded Earth.

## 6. Notes

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6. *Ibid.*, line 15.
7. *Ibid.*, lines 43-44.
8. *Ibid.*, line 18.
9. *Ibid.*, lines 81-84.
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16. *Intimations Ode*, lines 81-82.
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22. Ibid., 256.
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25. *Intimations Ode*, lines 177-178.
26. Ibid., lines 185-186.
27. Ibid., line 120.
28. *Philosophic Mind*, 238.
29. *Intimations Ode*, lines 194-195.
30. Ibid., line 193.
31. Ibid., line 192.
32. "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," 301.
33. *Intimations Ode*, line 80.