

The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850) - Penguin Classics

William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is an epic autobiographical poem that traces the poet's intellectual and spiritual development from childhood to adulthood. Composed in different stages over a period of 25 years, the poem exists in four distinct texts: *The Prelude* (1798), *The Prelude* (1799), *The Prelude* (1805), and *The Prelude* (1850). Each text represents a unique moment in Wordsworth's creative journey and offers valuable insights into the evolution of his poetic thought.



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★★★★☆ 4 out of 5

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The Text of 1798: Genesis of a Poetic Vision

The earliest text of *The Prelude*, written in 1798, is a fragmented and incomplete work that nonetheless reveals the nascent form of the poem. Wordsworth had originally intended to compose a philosophical poem on

the growth of a poet's mind, but this vision gradually expanded to encompass his entire life experience.

The 1798 text is characterized by its fragmentary nature, as Wordsworth experimented with different poetic forms and styles. The poem is largely composed of blank verse, but it also includes passages of terza rima and lyrical verse. The language is often dense and introspective, reflecting Wordsworth's preoccupation with his own inner life.

Despite its fragmentary nature, the 1798 text contains many of the key themes that would become central to *The Prelude* as a whole. These themes include the importance of childhood experience, the role of nature in shaping the imagination, and the poet's search for meaning and purpose in life.

The Text of 1799: A Dialogue with Coleridge

The text of *The Prelude* from 1799 is significantly longer and more structured than the 1798 text. Wordsworth had by this time met and become close friends with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the influence of Coleridge's philosophical and aesthetic ideas is evident throughout the poem.

The 1799 text is divided into two books, with each book focusing on a different aspect of Wordsworth's development. Book I traces the poet's early childhood experiences and his growing love of nature. Book II explores the poet's intellectual and spiritual struggles during his adolescence and young adulthood.

The influence of Coleridge is particularly evident in the poem's emphasis on the imagination as a creative force. Wordsworth argues that the imagination is not merely a faculty for creating fictions, but rather a powerful tool for understanding the world and our place within it.

The Text of 1805: A Personal and Historical Epic

The text of *The Prelude* from 1805 is the most ambitious and comprehensive of the four texts. Wordsworth had by this time completed his epic poem *The Excursion*, and the influence of that work is evident in the expanded scope and structure of *The Prelude*.

The 1805 text is divided into 14 books, with each book focusing on a different stage of Wordsworth's life. The poem traces the poet's development from his childhood in the Lake District to his experiences during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.

In the 1805 text, Wordsworth expands on the themes of nature, imagination, and childhood that he had explored in the earlier texts. He also introduces new themes, such as the importance of history and the role of the poet as a social critic.

The Text of 1850: A Final Reckoning

The final text of *The Prelude*, completed in 1850, is a significantly revised and expanded version of the 1805 text. Wordsworth had by this time become a respected and established poet, and the 1850 text reflects his mature reflections on his life and work.

The 1850 text is divided into 17 books, with the additional books focusing on Wordsworth's experiences during the latter part of his life. The poem

concludes with a moving meditation on the nature of poetic inspiration and the poet's legacy.

The 1850 text is notable for its increased emphasis on the poet's personal and emotional life. Wordsworth also revises and expands his earlier treatments of nature, imagination, and history. The result is a poem that is at once personal and universal, intimate and epic.

William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is a masterpiece of English literature that explores the profound and transformative power of the human mind. The poem exists in four distinct texts, each of which represents a different stage in Wordsworth's creative journey.

The 1798 text is a fragmentary and incomplete work that nonetheless reveals the nascent form of the poem. The 1799 text is a longer and more structured work that shows the influence of Coleridge's philosophical and aesthetic ideas. The 1805 text is the most ambitious and comprehensive of the four texts, tracing the poet's development from childhood to adulthood and exploring a wide range of themes. The 1850 text is a significantly revised and expanded version of the 1805 text, reflecting Wordsworth's mature reflections on his life and work.

As a whole, *The Prelude* is a testament to the power of poetry to illuminate the human experience. The poem is a rich and complex work that rewards repeated reading and study. It is a work that will continue to inspire and challenge readers for generations to come.

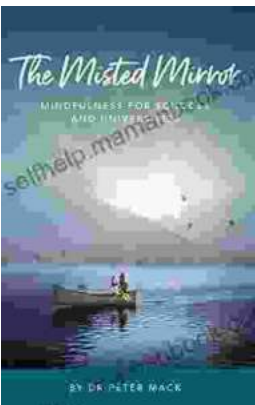
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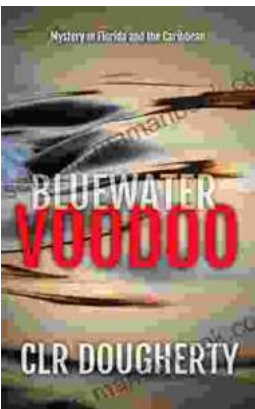


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