

The Tables Turned



POEM TEXT

- 1 Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
- 2 Or surely you'll grow double:
- 3 Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
- 4 Why all this toil and trouble?

- 5 The sun, above the mountain's head,
- 6 A freshening lustre mellow
- 7 Through all the long green fields has spread,
- 8 His first sweet evening yellow.

- 9 Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
- 10 Come, hear the woodland linnet,
- 11 How sweet his music! on my life,
- 12 There's more of wisdom in it.

- 13 And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
- 14 He, too, is no mean preacher:
- 15 Come forth into the light of things,
- 16 Let Nature be your teacher.

- 17 She has a world of ready wealth,
- 18 Our minds and hearts to bless—
- 19 Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
- 20 Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

- 21 One impulse from a vernal wood
- 22 May teach you more of man,
- 23 Of moral evil and of good,
- 24 Than all the sages can.

- 25 Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
- 26 Our meddling intellect
- 27 Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
- 28 We murder to dissect.

- 29 Enough of Science and of Art;
- 30 Close up those barren leaves;
- 31 Come forth, and bring with you a heart
- 32 That watches and receives.



SUMMARY

Get up buddy, and leave your books behind, or you'll only be weighed down even more. Get up buddy, and get that look off your face! Why are you working so hard?

The sun setting over the mountain gives off a soft, refreshing glow, and spreads its lovely evening light over the long, green fields.

Studying books is boring and the work never ends. Instead, come listen to the little finch, whose music is so pleasant! I swear there's more worth learning in his song than in books.

And listen! The song thrush sings so happily! He, like the finch, is a wonderful preacher. Come outside into the sunlight, and allow yourself to learn from nature.

Nature has so much to offer, and can bless our minds and hearts with the kind of unplanned wisdom that comes from physically engaging with the world, with a kind of truth that comes from happiness.

A forest in spring will teach you more about humanity, more about wickedness and goodness, than even the wisest of people ever could.

It's wonderful to learning from nature. Our annoying need to break things down so academically actually deforms the beautiful shape things naturally take. In trying so hard to understand them, we end up butchering them.

No more studying science or art; put away those fruitless pages. Come outside instead, with a heart open to simply watching and listening.



THEMES



THE WISDOM OF NATURE

"The Tables Turned" contrasts the "dull" realm of human knowledge with the joyful wisdom of nature—a world of sunshine and birdsong that illuminates truth in a way no book ever could. A person can study all they want, the speaker argues, but nature is a better teacher than all the "sages." Human beings, with their "meddling intellect," spend too much time attempting to dissect how things work rather than appreciating the beauty and wonder before them. To really gain wisdom, the speaker argues, people must humbly open their hearts to the lessons that nature has to offer.

The speaker urges a friend to put down the books and come outside to watch the sunset, insisting that doing so is much more valuable—and enjoyable—than intellectual study. The

speaker scoffs at the idea of spending one's life pouring over books, presenting such work as both difficult and unrewarding—as “a dull and endless strife.” Not only is this kind of study challenging and boring, it seems, but there's also no end in sight to it! No matter how much and how hard people study, their understanding will always be incomplete. Books, the speaker implies, are no substitute for being out there in the natural world—for experience.

Nature, meanwhile, fills people with delight even as it offers them wisdom. Things like the “first sweet evening yellow” of the sun going down over a mountain and the “blithe” sound of a songbird are sources of pleasure and joy that the world of academic study totally lacks. Nature isn't just lovely, either: the speaker insists that immersing oneself in nature is actually the best form of education around. In fact, the *pleasure* of nature is part of what makes it such a good teacher; the “cheerfulness” it elicits breeds “truth,” the speaker says, adding that there's more “wisdom” in the music of a linnet (another songbird) than there is in any number of books. Sitting around and reading simply can't compete with the “wisdom breathed by health” (that is, the wisdom from being out and about in the fresh air), and a tree in spring can teach one more about morality than even the wisest people in history.

Nature is rich with “wealth”—knowledge, wisdom, understanding—and is ready and willing to “bless” human hearts and minds, if only people are ready and willing to learn. That means rejecting the desire to “dissect” everything, to scientifically or academically process “the beauteous forms of things” and, in doing so, destroy them. Instead, the speaker says, people should move through the world with a sense of humility and openness, looking on and taking in whatever the natural world presents them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?*

The poem starts with the speaker urging a friend (which may just refer to the reader in general) to get up and leave their books behind. Otherwise, the speaker says, “you'll grow double”—which might be a reference to the physical weight of lugging books around, or to the idea that this friend will gain weight if they do nothing but sit around and read.

The speaker next tells this friend, “clear your looks.” Apparently,

studying has caused the friend to scowl or frown, and the speaker wants to remove the look of intense concentration.

The quick repetition (technically [epizeuxis](#)) of “up” adds urgency and intensity to the speaker's call to action, as does the [anaphora](#) and broader [parallelism](#) of lines 1 and 3:

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
[...]
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;

These lines are almost exactly the same, and this suggests a connection between putting down the books and clearing the pained/strained look from one's face. In other words, taking a break from studying offers a sense of relief. There's no need for all the “toil and trouble” of intellectual study, the speaker implies, with the [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) of this phrase drawing a connection between the “toil,” or work, of studying, and pain/suffering/etc/ (“trouble”).

This stanza is filled with such sonic devices, in fact. The repeated /b/, /l/, and /k/ sounds add a deliberate bit of clunkiness to the language, which in turn suggests the tedium of traditional studying:

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

This stanza also establishes the poem's use of [ballad meter](#). This means it's lines alternate between [iambic tetrameter](#) (lines with four iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern) and iambic trimeter (lines with just three iambs). The meter is pretty inconsistent here, however:

Up! up! | my Friend, | and quit | your books;
Or sure- | ly you'll | grow double:

Note how the poem starts with a [spondee](#) (two stressed beats in a row, as in “Up! up!”), which simply makes the speaker's command all the more energetic and forceful. The dangling unstressed beat at the ends of lines 2 and 4 (“trouble” and “double”) adds to the stanza's aforementioned clunkiness, making things feel a bit jumbled and disjointed (perhaps evoking the dizziness that comes from staring intensely at a book for too long!).

The poem also follows a ballad [rhyme scheme](#), meaning it follows the pattern ABAB; “books” rhymes with “looks” and “double” rhymes with “trouble.”

Finally, the speaker might be making a subtle [allusion](#) to Shakespeare's play [Macbeth](#) here, which famously includes the line, “Double, double toil and trouble.” This is part of a chant by a trio of witches spelling out danger for the play's main

character—and the allusion might suggest that academic study is similarly a recipe for pain and agony!

LINES 5-8

*The sun, above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.*

The speaker [juxtaposes](#) the "toil and trouble" of books with the easy beauty of the natural world. To do this, the speaker first [personifies](#) the sun lingering over a mountain as it sets. Like some sort of benevolent god, the sun spreads "His first sweet evening yellow" (the golden glow of the sunset) across "long green fields."

Light is traditionally [symbolic](#) of knowledge and understanding, and this [imagery](#) implies that the natural world is infused with wisdom. The fact that the fields are "green," meanwhile, links them to fresh growth and life itself; green is a color that represents newness and vitality, and the imagery thus suggests that the wisdom and warmth of nature is a nourishing, life-giving force.

The choice of words here draws further attention to the inherent *goodness* of the natural world. The sun's light is gentle and pleasant, and the vibrant green of the fields is bathed in a yellow "sweet[ness]." The energizing "lustre" (or sheen) of sunlight touching the landscape is described as "mellow," meaning there's nothing harsh or rough about it. This picture of nature is a pointedly idyllic one, and supports the poem's point that spending time outdoors is wholesome and restorative.

The sounds of this stanza are smoother and gentler than the poem's first, which supports this benevolent vision of nature. Note the [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) of soft, gentle /f/, /l/, and /s/ sounds, as well as the [assonance](#) of /uh/, short /eh/, and long /ee/ sounds throughout these lines:

The sun, above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through **all** the **long green fields** has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Altogether, these lines feature a gentler and more pleasant cadence than the poem's first stanza. The [euphony](#) of this stanza reinforces the idea that the natural world contains a simplicity and sweetness that will restore the human spirit.

LINES 9-12

*Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.*

The poem again [juxtaposes](#) the world of books with nature, saying that the former is "a dull and endless strife." The speaker

is essentially saying three things here:

1. That learning from books is boring ("dull");
2. That the work of academic study is never-ending ("endless");
3. And that those who live solely in the intellectual realm are unhappy and prone to bitter disagreement ("strife").

Having thoroughly dissed book learning, the speaker invites the reader to listen to the "sweet" call of the "woodland linnet," a kind of songbird (specifically a finch), instead. The speaker swears that this lovely music contains more wisdom than any book—and it's much more fun to take in, too!

The musical [consonance](#) of the words "woodland linnet" evokes the bird's "sweet" music itself. The /w/ sound in "woodland," meanwhile, helps to emphasize the relationship between nature (the woods) and the "wisdom" of the linnet.

Again, the speaker plays with the poem's [ballad meter](#) a bit here, start both lines 9 and 10 with a **stressed** beat (remember that iambs start with **unstressed** beats):

Books! 'tis [...]
Come, hear [...]

The metrical variations once again add urgency and insistence to the speaker's tone. The speaker emphatically rejects books, and emphatically insists that the listener come outside and listen to the birds.

LINES 13-14

*And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:*

The speaker tells the reader to listen to another songbird—this time calling out the "throstle" (more commonly known as a song thrush), whose song is "blithe," or carefree and happy. The speaker adds that the throstle is "no mean preacher," a phrase that means the birds is actually *a very good preacher!*

A preacher, of course, is someone who preaches—who delivers religious truths and beliefs to the public. The music of the natural world isn't just nice to listen to, then, but is also deeply informative; it can teach people deep, meaningful truths.

What's more, the focus on the throstle's singing implies that its preaching skills *stem from the beauty of its song*. A good preacher doesn't bore people with complex theories, the poem thus suggests, but rather *moves* people with simple, compelling beauty. Likewise, the throstle is capable of teaching people something simply by singing its happy song. This suggests that people don't need to entirely *understand* nature's lessons in order to benefit from them. Instead, it's enough to simply open themselves up to the wondrous music of the natural world.

This idea fits right in with the Romantics' general outlook. Wordsworth and his fellow Romantic poets prioritized feeling and emotion over rigid intellectual or scientific understanding. And, notably, both the linnet from line 10 and the throstle here are birds that often appeared in English poetry of Wordsworth's day. This might suggest a relationship between the music of *poetry* and the music of *nature*. Much like nature's lessons, poetry doesn't need to be entirely understood in order to be felt.

LINES 15-16

*Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.*

The speaker urges the listener to "Come forth into the light of things," bringing back the light [symbolism](#) first mentioned in the second stanza. Remember, light represents knowledge and understanding. In telling the listener to step into the warm light of the sun, the speaker is also telling this person to immerse themselves in natural wisdom.

The mention of a "preacher" in the previous line brings to mind religious teachings as well, and light here might also suggest *moral* goodness and even *divine*, or *holy*, truths. If the throstle is a preacher, then nature is the preacher's temple: sacred and filled with the "light" of everything good and noble.

The speaker goes on to say plainly that the listener should "Let" the natural world teach them. Nature itself gets [personified](#) as a teacher here, while the word "Let" suggests that people just need to open their minds and hearts in order to receive nature's lessons. Learning from nature doesn't require the grueling "toil" nor the "endless strife" of academic study. Instead, there's a simplicity and ease to this kind of learning; much like attending church, a person's job is to listen and absorb.

The capitalization of "Nature" also reflects the respect and admiration Wordsworth felt for the natural world. To the Romantics, nature wasn't just a resource to be exploited; it was its own entity that deserved to be appreciated and treated with care and attentiveness. The natural world wasn't inanimate or less important than the human-made world; people were designed to be in relationship with it, not in control of it.

LINES 17-20

*She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless—
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.*

The speaker continues the [personification](#) of nature here, treating the natural world as a female entity "ready" to bless people's "minds and hearts" with her "wealth" of knowledge. In other words, nature has a lot of wisdom to offer, and she's eager to offer it! Nature gives of herself willingly, without restraint, and her lessons enrich people both mentally and

emotionally.

By letting nature teach and bless them, people stand to gain "Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health." In other words, wisdom develops from actually *living*, from physically experiencing the world. And whereas studying books is tedious and dull, the wisdom from nature is "spontaneous"—it arrives suddenly, easily, without even being asked for. Being in nature makes people happy, and that "cheerfulness," in turn, breeds "Truth."

The [repetition](#) (technically [diacope](#)) of the word "breathed" in these lines emphasizes the active, lively process of learning from nature. Breathing in fresh air connects people to nature; this air is perhaps one of the many gifts that nature wishes to "bless" people with.

The broader [parallelism](#) of lines 19-20 (which feature the same grammatical structure) also draws attention to the relationship between the abstract concepts of "wisdom," "truth," "health," and "cheerfulness" and the concrete, physical action of breathing—of being alive and physically experiencing the natural world.

LINES 21-24

*One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.*

Every corner of nature is filled with wisdom and truth, the speaker says, and even a single "impulse" from a "vernal wood" can teach people something. Vernal just means that this "wood" is related to spring, and that "wood" itself refers either to a single tree or an entire forest. The speaker is saying that even the slightest little thing that happens in the woods or to a tree in springtime contains a lesson.

And it's no small lesson, either! The speaker says that whatever this little occurrence may be—whether it's a sudden breeze ruffling a tree's leaves or the music of from songbird sitting upon its branches—it may teach a person more about human nature and morality than even the wisest people throughout history.

The speaker again uses lots of [consonance](#) in this stanza, particularly of the /m/ sound ("impulse," "from," "May," "more," "man," "moral"). This creates a bit of a muffled effect, subtly echoing the quietness with which one might walk through the woods, simply listening and watching.

This quietness also contrasts with the noise and distraction of city living, of industrialization, of the bickering of academic "strife." In the woods, human noise quiets down and people become part of the natural world again; as such, they are able to learn about themselves and about what is good and right, as well as what is "evil"—a concept the poem will expand upon in the following stanza.

LINES 25-28

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.*

The poem again stresses the inherent goodness of nature, the speaker now saying that the "lore" (or knowledge and tradition) that nature offers is "Sweet." In other words, not only is nature filled with truth and wisdom, but its lessons are delightful. They come in the form of birdsong and warm light slanting across fields.

Nature's sweetness contrasts with human beings' "meddling intellect." Once again [juxtaposing](#) the intellectual world with the natural one, the speaker argues that people's thirst for knowledge destroys the things it tries to understand. More specifically, it "Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things." (This is almost certainly a reference to the effects of industrialization in Wordsworth's time.) The speaker is worried that in trying to "dissect" things (that is, cut them open in order to better understand them), people are actually just killing the very things that make life worth living!

The speaker goes so far as to call this quest for knowledge outright "murder." The "evil" that the speaker mentioned in the last stanza, then, might refer to the evil of human beings deforming the natural world for their own gain. If people aren't careful, the poem warns, they will destroy the very things that ought to bring them joy, truth, health, and wisdom.

The brief [sibilance](#) of "Mis-shapes," "beauteous," and "dissect" emphasizes the relationship between the human need to understand and the violent alteration of the beauty of the natural world. The /s/ sounds evoke a threatening hiss, suggesting the human potential for evil and destruction.

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LINES 29-32

*Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.*

The poem concludes with a strong statement; the speaker says, "Enough of Science and of Art." In other words, no more rigid academic studies! It's time for something different.

The capitalization of "Science" and "Art" suggests that the speaker isn't really denouncing all of scientific study or the entire world of artistic expression. Rather, the speaker is criticizing treating these things like the be-all, end-all of learning—as the ultimate arbiters of truth and wisdom. In other words, the speaker is saying that there's more to life than

books!

The speaker instructs the reader to "Close up those barren leaves," [metaphorically](#) treating a book's pages as something infertile. Only nature has the ability to renew itself, to create new life, to flourish. The "leaves" of a book, then, are only a pale, flimsy imitation of the real thing—which is all the more reason to "close" those books up and step out into nature. And, having put the book down, the speaker commands the listener to "Come forth," echoing the earlier instruction to "Come forth into the light of things" from line 15.

The speaker instructs the reader to "bring with [them] a heart / That watches and receives." Instead of actively trying to "dissect" things, people must simply learn to listen and observe, to "receive" the gifts that nature has to offer. The poem also stresses that this kind of learning happens in the *heart*—that the truth is accessed through feeling and not just thinking.



SYMBOLS



LIGHT

Light [symbolizes](#) truth, wisdom, and understanding. The speaker contrasts the "toil and trouble" of intellectual study with the "first sweet evening yellow" of the sun setting over a mountain. The sun's "freshening lustre mellow"—or its soft, refreshing glow—"has spread" all across the green fields outside, representing the way that the natural world is suffused with truth and wisdom.

Midway through the poem, invites the reader to "Come forth into the light of things"—to see/understand the world more clearly. All this light is also linked to moral goodness and perhaps divinity; the speaker calls a songbird a "preacher," implying that the lessons of nature contain divine or holy truths about the world. To step into the "light" would be to step into that truth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "The sun, above the mountain's head, / A freshening lustre mellow / Through all the long green fields has spread, / His first sweet evening yellow."
- **Line 15:** "Come forth into the light of things,"



MUSIC

Music here represents the sheer pleasure of being in nature, and the fact that learning doesn't have to be hard, joyless work—it can actually be as easy as simply observing (or listening to) the natural world.

The poem argues that there's more wisdom in the "sweet" music of the woodland linnet (a kind of songbird) than there is in any amount of studying. The same goes for the song of the

throstle (another songbird). And nature's lessons don't occur in spite of the beauty and sweetness of this music, but rather *because* of it. The poem suggests that the "blithe" (or happy) quality of the music is what makes it so easy to receive. Likewise, lessons about "good and evil" don't have to be boring or filled with "strife" (that is, bitter disagreement). Instead, people can learn just about everything they need to know by simply enjoying nature, whose music has a way of making these lessons more interesting and pleasant.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "Come, hear the woodland linnet, / How sweet his music! on my life, / There's more of wisdom in it."
- **Lines 13-14:** "And hark! how blithe the throstle sings! / He, too, is no mean preacher:"



POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

This poem uses [consonance](#) to great effect. Along with its steady [meter](#) and [rhyme](#), all this musical consonance allows the poem to practically sing! This is important in a poem stressing the value of lessons that, more than once here, take the form of birdsong.

The liquid /l/ sound is especially common, lending the poem a smooth, melodic, sensuous quality throughout. For instance, in the second and third stanzas note lush phrases such as "lustre mellow," "all the long green fields," "evening yellow," and "woodland linnet." In this way, the poem doesn't just convey nature's beauty as an *idea*, but also *evokes* that beauty directly through sound. This, in turn, reflects the speaker's argument: knowledge isn't just something to be acquired through books, and is better acquired by listening to nature's songs and rhythms.

In stanza 4, /l/ consonance gets joined by gentle /th/ consonance ("blithe," "throstle," "forth," "things") and a touch of [sibilance](#) ("throstle," "sings"). These additions bring yet more softness to this stanza, as if setting aside the world of books for sunlight and birdsong may thaw out the heart and ease the mind.

In the poem's final stanza, pairs of louder, bolder sounds add emphasis to the speaker's final call to:

Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring [...]

The sharp /c/ sounds and booming /b/ sounds make the speaker's words feel all the more urgent and insistent.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "quit," "books"
- **Line 2:** "surely," "you'll," "double"
- **Line 3:** "clear," "looks"
- **Line 4:** "all," "toil," "trouble"
- **Line 5:** "mountain's"
- **Line 6:** "freshening," "lustre," "mellow"
- **Line 7:** "all," "long," "fields"
- **Line 8:** "first," "sweet," "yellow"
- **Line 9:** "dull," "endless"
- **Line 10:** "woodland," "linnet"
- **Line 11:** "music," "my"
- **Line 12:** "more," "wisdom"
- **Line 13:** "blithe," "throstle," "sings"
- **Line 15:** "light"
- **Line 16:** "Let," "Nature," "teacher"
- **Line 17:** "world," "ready"
- **Line 18:** "hearts," "bless"
- **Line 19:** "Spontaneous," "breathed," "health"
- **Line 20:** "Truth," "breathed," "cheerfulness"
- **Line 21:** "impulse," "vernal"
- **Line 22:** "May," "more," "man"
- **Line 23:** "moral," "evil"
- **Line 25:** "lore"
- **Line 26:** "meddling," "intellect"
- **Line 27:** "Mis-shapes," "beauteous," "forms"
- **Line 28:** "murder," "dissect"
- **Line 30:** "Close," "those," "barren"
- **Line 31:** "Come," "bring"

ALLITERATION

Full [alliteration](#) is less common than [consonance](#) in the poem, but when it does pop up, it serves a similar purpose. Like consonance, alliteration adds sonic texture to the poem, and draws the reader's attention to certain combinations of words.

In stanza 5, for instance, /w/ sounds create a relationship between the words "world," "wealth," and "wisdom," emphasizing the goodness and abundance of the natural world. Similarly, in stanza 7, alliteration of the /m/ sound underscores the relationship between people's "meddling" intellect and the negative impact it has on things—"Mis-shap[ing]" and "murder[ing]" whatever it's trying so hard to understand.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "toil," "trouble"
- **Line 17:** "world," "wealth"
- **Line 19:** "wisdom"
- **Line 22:** "May," "more," "man"
- **Line 23:** "moral"
- **Line 26:** "meddling"
- **Line 27:** "Mis-shapes"

- **Line 28:** "murder"
- **Line 30:** "Close," "barren"
- **Line 31:** "Come," "bring"

- **Lines 21-22:** "wood / May"
- **Lines 26-27:** "intellect / Mis-shapes"
- **Lines 31-32:** "heart / That"

ENJAMBMENT

This poem contains very little [enjambment](#); the vast majority of its lines are [end-stopped](#), which creates a steady, controlled rhythm throughout. This, in turn, makes the speaker sound confident and forceful. The lack of enjambment also helps draw attention to the poem's [rhyme scheme](#), since the clear pauses of end-stop push readers to linger for a beat on the poem's many end rhymes. (For a poem concerned with the wisdom of nature's music, it should be no surprise that rhyme plays an important part!)

There are only a few places in the poem where the reader is encouraged to continue beyond the end of a line without pausing for a breath, however, and these enjambments are made all the more interesting by how rarely they appear. The first of these is in lines 6-7:

A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,

The enjambment here seems to mimic the action of the poem: just as the sunlight is spreading gently through the fields, line 6 spreads across the white space of the page. These lines meld together in a single breath, signaling the ease and connection that comes with being out in nature.

Similarly, in lines 21-22 ("One impulse from [...] more of man"), there is no pause between nature's "impulse" and the lesson learned by the person paying attention to it. Again, this enjambment creates a sense of ease, of continuity between what happens in the natural world and a person's ability to learn something from this.

Of course, there is also a seamless relationship between humanity's "meddling intellect" and the way it "Mis-shapes" or disfigures "the beauteous forms of things." Enjambment in lines 26-27 seems to suggest it is all too easy for people to turn their gift of reasoning into a curse, their sharp minds into instruments that cut and mutilate.

Finally, enjambment in lines 31-32 again emphasizes the graceful relationship people can have with nature if they only approach it an open heart. The white space after "heart" seems to imply just that: an openness to possibility, surprise, a willingness to "receive," or truly feel and accept nature's lessons.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "mellow / Through"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker [juxtaposes](#) the active, pleasant, and beautiful natural world with the boring, sedentary world of traditional academic study. While studying books is "a dull and endless strife"—a tiring, never-ending endeavor—the natural world is a place filled with "sweet" music and warm sunsets, where birds sing and "Nature" readily offers a "wealth" of knowledge and understanding to all who seek it.

Reading causes one to "grow double" (in the sense of being weighed down, seeing double, or gaining weight by being so sedentary), but being out in nature is "health[y]." Books cause pained "looks" and require hours of "toil and trouble," but nature offers easy "cheerfulness" and "spontaneous wisdom."

Nature is also a "green" world brimming with potential. The image of the "vernal wood" points to the idea of spring, with all its newness, freshness, and vitality. In spring, the woods are full of things growing—plants putting out new leaves, flowers blooming, animals being born, and so forth. In other words, the image of a spring wood suggests that nature is filled with potential lessons and opportunities to grow. By contrast, rigid subjects like "Science" and "Art" are barren—unable to bring forth life. That's why not even all the wisest people in history (those "sages") can compete with the insight offered by a tree in springtime.

All this juxtaposition makes it clear that nature's teaching methods are far superior to those of traditional academic study—in terms of both the amount of things one can learn, and what it's like to actually learn them. In other words, nature offers more and better knowledge, and it also just feels better to learn from the natural world.

Take the sentiment of lines 19 and 20, where [diacope](#) (the repetition of the word "breathed") suggests that not only are nature's lessons acquired through engaging with the *physical* world rather than a world of pure ideas, but also that those natural lessons *feel good*. It's a sign of "health" to take deep breaths; one is more likely to feel "cheerful" when one is breathing fresh air. Generally speaking (except in some cases of disability), breathing doesn't require a huge deal of effort either; it's simply what bodies are designed to do.

This juxtaposes with the way in which human intellect "murder[s]" things in order to understand them, denying things their natural "beauteous form[s]." Nature pushes people to understand the world as it is, whereas human beings' "meddling intellect" simply makes a mess of the world's beauty.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) helps the poem build its argument that nature is a better teacher than the purely intellectual world of books. Parallelism first appears in lines 1 and 3, which both follow the same grammatical formula:

Up! up! my Friend, and [verb] your [noun];

This parallelism (and the opening [anaphora](#), which is a specific kind of parallelism), draws a connection between quitting books and clearing looks—that is, between putting an end to studying and feeling more relaxed, peaceful, joyful, etc.

This parallelism thus kicks the poem off with the structure of a logical argument: if you do x then y will happen. If you don't leave the world of books in favor of some fresh air, you're going to "grow double" (perhaps meaning that a person will feel weighed down by impractical knowledge, that their vision will double from staring at words on a page, or even that they will gain weight from being so sedentary!). At the same time, by getting up and relaxing the muscles in your face (which have been all scrunched up in concentration), you might just realize how unnecessary "all this toil and trouble" really is.

Later, in lines 19-20, the parallel statements "wisdom **breathed by health**" and "Truth **breathed by cheerfulness**" very plainly show the effects ("wisdom" and "truth") that result from between being out in nature (experiencing "health" and "cheerfulness").

Parallelism pops up yet again in lines 22-23, as the speaker describes the "vernal wood" having much to offer in terms of life lessons. Not only does it have something to say "of man," but also "of moral evil and of good." In other words, nature's lessons are plentiful; a single journey in nature might lead to any number of valuable insights.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;"
- **Line 3:** "Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;"
- **Lines 19-20:** "wisdom breathed by health, / Truth breathed by cheerfulness."
- **Lines 22-23:** "of man, / Of moral evil and of good,"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem [personifies](#) nature in various ways throughout, making the natural world seem like a wise and welcoming teacher.

In the second stanza, for example, the sunset becomes "His first

sweet evening yellow," with the pronoun "his" referring to the sun. By treating the like a person, the poem imbues nature with a kind of benevolence and goodwill; the sun is actively spreading light across the field as if to make things sweeter. Even the mountain the speaker sees is personified, described as having a "head."

In stanza 4, the speaker says that the "throstle," a kind of songbird, is "no mean preacher" (with the phrase "no mean" suggesting that he is in fact a very good preacher!). By personifying the bird in this way, the speaker argues that nature is just as capable of imparting important truths as any religious leader. And, of course, the speaker explicitly calls "Nature" a "teacher" in line 16, again insisting that Nature has an active role to play in educating people about themselves and the world around them.

The speaker goes on to personify Nature as "She [...] of ready wealth." In other words, the natural world has no shortage of blessings to bestow on the "minds" and "hearts" of people who are willing to pay attention to her.

Finally, the speaker subtly personifies human beings' "meddling intellect," suggesting that the human desire to "dissect" everything prevents people from truly understanding and appreciating the world.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 10-15
- Lines 16-20
- Lines 25-27

IMAGERY

The poem uses [imagery](#) to bring nature's vivid beauty to life for the reader—which is important, given that the speaker also believes that the joy and pleasure nature inspires is precisely what makes nature such a good teacher.

For example, in stanza 2, the speaker describes the sun as spreading "a freshening lustre mellow / Through all the long green fields." This description evokes gentle light flooding across the earth, covering it with golden warmth. Light [symbolizes](#) wisdom and knowledge, while the fact that the fields are green symbolically links them to growth and fertility. Altogether, the imagery here presents nature as a welcoming land filled with knowledge that's ripe for the taking. The speaker also describes the sunset as "His [the sun's] first sweet evening yellow." The word "sweet" again presents nature's light as pleasant and lovely, while the color yellow suggests cheerful vibrancy.

In the following stanza, the speaker instructs the reader to come "hear the woodland linnet, / How sweet his music!" This time the imagery focuses on sound rather than sight. Still, the music is "sweet," just as the "evening light" in the prior stanza

was. The natural world seems overflowing with joy and pleasure. Then, in line 13, the speaker describes the thristle's singing as "blithe," or light-hearted and happy. The image of a bird happily singing conveys the idea that nature's lessons are much more enjoyable than the "dull" lessons of academia or religion.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "The sun, above the mountain's head, / A freshening lustre mellow / Through all the long green fields has spread, / His first sweet evening yellow."
- **Lines 10-11:** "Come, hear the woodland linnet, / How sweet his music!"
- **Line 13:** "And hark! how blithe the thristle sings!"

METAPHOR

While the poem mostly relies on [imagery](#) and more straightforward, literal language to make its point, it does include some important [metaphors](#) near the end. In lines 26-28, the poem uses a metaphor to explore the harmful effects of human intellect that isn't balanced out by appreciation of and engagement with the natural world:

Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

In this metaphor, human intellect becomes an instrument that cuts, maims, and even kills the beautiful, natural "shapes" that it's trying to understand. While the capacity for reasoning is one of humanity's greatest gifts, the poem argues this gift can get out of hand and become quite damaging if people aren't careful to step back and simply appreciate and honor the natural world to which they belong.

Likewise, lines 29-30 describe the pages of books meant to impart knowledge of "Science" and "Art" as "barren leaves." In other words, these books have little to offer in terms of growth or newness. They aren't fertile the way the earth is fertile. In the end, books represent a world of information and ideas, which are only useful in relation to the real, physical, natural world—they have nothing to offer on their own.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 26-28:** "Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:— / We murder to dissect."
- **Lines 29-30:** "Enough of Science and of Art; / Close up those barren leaves;"



VOCABULARY

Quit (Line 1) - Leave behind or get rid of.

Toil (Line 4) - Hard, continual work.

Lustre (Line 6) - A gentle sheen or soft glow of light hitting a surface.

Strife (Line 9) - Conflict or friction; bitter disagreement.

Linnet (Line 10) - A small songbird (specifically a kind of finch).

Hark (Line 13) - Listen.

Blithe (Line 13) - Happy or joyous.

Thristle (Line 13) - A thrush (another songbird).

No mean preacher (Line 14) - The phrase "no mean" indicates something of high quality or degree, so "no mean preacher" is actually a really good or great preacher!

Vernal (Line 21) - Relating to or taking place in the spring, or having some quality of spring such as newness, vitality, youth, etc.

Sages (Line 24) - Very wise people.

Lore (Line 25) - Traditions or knowledge.

Meddling (Line 26) - The speaker is saying that people's "intellect" likes to intrude upon or interfere with things.

Mis-shapes (Line 27) - Deforms.

Dissect (Line 28) - To methodically cut something into pieces or take it apart in order to study its anatomy/how it works.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Tables Turned" is made up of eight four-line [stanzas](#) (a.k.a. [quatrains](#)). The quatrains are more specifically [ballad](#) stanzas, which just means that they use a specific [meter](#) and [rhyme scheme](#) (both of which are discussed in the next sections of this guide).

The poem's form is thus very steady, comforting in its predictability and pleasant in its simplicity. This makes sense, given that the speaker condemns people's tendency to mess up "the beauteous forms of things" by trying too hard to intellectually "dissect" them. There's no dissecting needed here: the form is straightforward and clear.

METER

"The Tables Turned" follows something called [common meter](#), which is common for [ballads](#). This means that the first and third lines of each [stanza](#) use [iambic](#) tetrameter (they have four iambs: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM), while the second and fourth lines use iambic trimeter (they have only three iambs, three da-DUMs). Take the last stanza for a clear example

of this meter in action:

Enough | of Sci- | ence and | of Art;
Close up | those bar- | ren leaves;
Come forth, | and bring | with you | a heart
That watch- | es and | receives.

This perfect example of ballad meter gives the poem its pleasingly steady rhythm; the poem just sounds nice! This rhythm is also closely associated with Christian church hymns, and ballad meter thus also lends the poem a sense of reverence and awe. This makes sense, seeing as the speaker goes so far as to say that the throstle makes a good preacher.

Of course, there are some variations throughout the poem. The very first line starts with a stressed beat, making that opening foot something called a [spondee](#)—a foot with two stresses in a row. This lends a sense of emphasis and urgency to the speaker's insistence that this friend get up already:

Up! up! | my Friend, | and quit | your books;

The same thing happens in line 3 (which repeats that "Up! up!"), while line 9 starts with a [trochee](#) (stressed-unstressed, DUM-da):

Books! 'tis | a dull | and end- | less strife:

The opening stress here adds extra emphasis to the word "Books," again making the speaker's call feel all the more urgent and emphatic.

Other variations on the meter are less evocative. Lines 6 and 8, for instance, end with an extra, dangling unstressed beat (as in "A fresh- | ening lust- | re mel- | low"). It's pretty common for poets to be short on syllables or add an extra—as long as the line still follows the general pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables (and in this case it does), the overall meter remains steady.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Tables Turned" follows the strict [rhyme scheme](#) of a [ballad](#):

ABAB

This means that the first and third lines of each [stanza](#) rhyme with each other, as do the second and fourth lines in each stanza. As is the case with the poem's steady form and [meter](#), this regular rhyme pattern imbues the poem with music and a sense of simplicity. This all makes sense, given that the poem celebrates the simple beauty and music of the natural world. The poem just sounds pleasant to the ear, and this underscores one of the speaker's main ideas: that learning doesn't have to be dull and awful, but rather can be delightful—just as delightful as reading this poem aloud.



SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone who's passionate about nature and humankind's relationship to it. Although the poem begins with the speaker addressing someone as "my Friend," the speaker is probably just talking to the reader in general rather than a specific person. The speaker wants to convince the reader that they shouldn't limit the scope of their learning to academia alone. Note that the speaker isn't saying books themselves are bad or not worth reading—anyone looking at this poem would likely have found it in a book, after all! Instead, the speaker believes that everyone should experience the pleasure of learning from the natural world.

Many readers take the speaker to be Wordsworth himself, given that the poem's attitude is in line with Wordsworth's own beliefs. In fact, the book in which this poem was initially published, *Lyrical Ballads*, was one of the foundational texts of English Romanticism—a literary movement that championed connection with nature at a time of increased industrialization.



SETTING

Taken literally, the poem takes place towards the end of the day; the speaker is urging a friend, who's studying, to put down the books and look up as the last rays of light wash over the earth as the sun sets. There's a mountain in the distance, a green field (which might indicate farmland), and songbirds warbling in the trees.

Through these details, the poem evokes a rural, pastoral, or even wild environment. Nature isn't scary, dangerous, or disinterested here; rather, it's lovely and benevolent, even [personified](#) as woman who "has a world of ready wealth" to offer people. In other words, the earth is generous.

The poem also references a specific time of year. The "vernal wood" of line 21 suggests that it's springtime, and, in turn, evokes everything associated with spring: youth, vitality, rebirth, and renewal. The reference to spring fills the poem with a sense of hopefulness, perhaps suggesting the refreshing, revitalizing power of connecting with nature.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Tables Turned" was published in 1798 in *Lyrical Ballads*, a joint collection authored by William Wordsworth and [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) (though the majority of the poems were written by Wordsworth). The two poets had set out to upend conventions of 18th-century English poetry, which they considered to be stilted and overly elaborate. And while the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* might not seem all that radical

compared to today's poetry, they were very unconventional in Wordsworth's day because they used plain, everyday language and were written for and about ordinary people.

The *Lyrical Ballads* would go on to be one of the most influential texts in all of English literature. It helped to usher in [Romanticism](#), an artistic movement that emphasized the beauty and wonder of nature, the importance of emotion, and ordinary individuals' capacity for heroic action.

Romanticism was in part a response to the [Enlightenment](#), which had held sway over European philosophy and art for over a century. Where Enlightenment thinkers favored reason and the scientific method, the Romantics stressed the value of feeling and imagination. This shift can be seen in "The Tables Turned" (whose very name suggests an upending of certain conventions): the speaker argues for the inherent goodness of a life lived in proximity to nature, and condemns the "meddling" of reason and intellect—impulses that "murder" the very things that make life worth living.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like just about anyone living in Europe at the end of the 18th century, Wordsworth was profoundly impacted by the [French Revolution](#). Early in his career he was politically active and outspoken about democracy and the liberation of common people; he supported the French who were fighting to end the feudal system and absolute monarchy. These beliefs were at the core of his early poetic experiments (though he grew much more conservative with age).

The driving force behind Wordsworth's work, however, and Romanticism more generally, was the [Industrial Revolution](#), which began in Great Britain in the 1760s. New technologies such as the steam engine and the flying shuttle led to the creation of factories and the mass production of goods. People began moving en masse from the countryside to cities, resulting in intense urban overcrowding and issues with sanitation and pollution. The poor were often forced to work grueling and dangerous factory jobs for little pay, even as the rich were living more comfortably than ever.

As factories produced more and more goods (and the upper classes became more and more accustomed to buying them), there was also a greater need for natural resources like coal and lumber. Wordsworth and his contemporaries were alarmed by the subsequent depletion of the countryside.

[9622-h.htm](#))

- [The Making of the Lyrical Ballads](#) — An essay by Jonathan Kerr for the Wordsworth Trust about the creation of the *Lyrical Ballads*. (<https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2014/08/13/a-new-species-of-poetry-the-making-of-lyrical-ballads/>)
- [Romantic Poetry](#) — brief introduction to Romanticism, a movement helmed by Wordsworth and a few of his contemporaries. (<https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-romanticism>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a recording of "The Tables Turned" as read by Amy Hall, a trainee for the Wordsworth Trust. The accompanying video was filmed at Dove Cottage, which was Wordsworth's home from 1799 until 1808. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MTZHnvyqOE>)
- [The Industrial Revolution](#) — Learn more about Britain's first Industrial Revolution, which spurred the Romantics' wish for a return to nature. (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution#:~:text=This%20process%20began%20in%20Brita>)
- [Wordsworth's Life](#) — Read a biography of the poet courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- [Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802](#)
- [Extract from The Prelude \(Boat Stealing\)](#)
- [I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud](#)
- [Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey](#)
- [Lines Written in Early Spring](#)
- [London, 1802](#)
- [My Heart Leaps Up](#)
- [She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways](#)
- [The Solitary Reaper](#)
- [The World Is Too Much With Us](#)
- [We Are Seven](#)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Introduction to the Lyrical Ballads](#) — Check out an electronic copy of the book in which this poem was first published, including an introduction by the authors. (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9622/9622-h/>)



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