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Abstract

Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" stages an unresolved dispute between an adult speaker and a young girl who insists that her deceased siblings remain among her "seven," despite his efforts to correct her arithmetic. Critics have long debated whether her insistence reflects childish ignorance, folkloric superstition, or genuine spiritual insight. Arthur Beatty reads the poem through Wordsworth's associationism, arguing that the girl's materialist conflation of body and person marks an intellectual deficiency the speaker seeks to correct. Arthur Moore and Alan Richardson instead locate her worldview in pre-Christian folk belief or catechetical failure, treating her language of continued presence in the grave as evidence of a non-orthodox, "carnivalized" attitude toward death. This essay argues that both readings misread the historical and theological context surrounding the poem's composition. Drawing on Wordsworth's Fenwick Notes, the ecclesiastical and architectural history of Goodrich Castle and its parish church, and eighteenth-century Anglican funerary practice, I demonstrate that the girl's family would have been steeped in orthodox Anglican teaching through church-cottage tenancy and repeated exposure to burial rites. Read against contemporary Anglican sermons by William Law and William Paley, her paradoxical language of bodily presence and departure ("God released her... and then she went away") reflects not folk paganism but an innocent, internally consistent adaptation of Anglican resurrection doctrine. I contend that Wordsworth portrays the child not as deluded or catechized but as intuitively grasping a theological truth the adult speaker has forgotten.

Keywords: *William Wordsworth, childhood innocence, Anglican theology, death and grief in literature, Fenwick Notes, "We Are Seven"*

At the heart of Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" is a simple question: innocence or delusion? The young girl in this poem, who numbers her dead siblings as part of her family, repeats the line, "We are seven." In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker informs us that he is "throwing words away; for still / The little Maid would have her will" (Wordsworth, *Complete Poetical Works*, lines 67-68). She does not budge despite his attempts to convince her that only five children remain in her family. Wordsworth based this poem on a real interaction with a young girl at Goodrich Castle, though the details of this conversation are unknown (Wordsworth, *Fenwick Notes* 39). Because of this historical basis, two separate questions arise in relation to this child's innocence or delusion. First, was this girl's grief healthy in actuality? Depending on the precision of Wordsworth's account, one might be able to deduce the legitimate, historic reality of the young girl's grief. This was a real person, and therefore, her coping mechanism was a fact of her existence, whether healthy or unhealthy; however, a distinct, but not wholly unrelated question arises out of that: how does Wordsworth portray the young child's grief? Does he view the girl as reacting in an emotionally unstable manner or as seeing a vision that "is not limited by the cold facts of the earth, but is capable of apprehending immortality" (Hiers 9)? This essay will answer both questions by claiming that Wordsworth viewed the young girl as attaining a higher form of truth through innocence and that she reflects a historic Anglican view of death.

First, we must acknowledge the textual evidence for our reading of "We Are Seven." Since Wordsworth is writing about a genuine experience, some have identified his views with those of the adult in the poem. In his book *William Wordsworth: His Doctrine and Art in Their Historical Relations*, Arthur Beatty claims that the "proper Wordsworthian interpretation [is] associationism" (210). He believes that Wordsworth looks down on the girl for her purely materialistic focus. *The APA Dictionary of Psychology* defines "Associationism" as "the theory that complex mental processes, such as thinking, learning, and memory, can be wholly or mainly explained by the associative links formed between ideas" (77). That is to say that since the bodies of her siblings are in the ground, the girl in the poem associates their literal existence as also being in the ground. Beatty claims that every child would answer precisely as she did, so Wordsworth is attempting to help her grasp the more mature vision of

associationism that, since humans are solely matter, her siblings are dead and no longer contain any meaning. Beatty says that her nonsensical immaturity, rather than innocence, is at play. He argues this from the opening stanza, which says, "A simple child... what should it know of death?" He interprets "simple" as ignorance, and Beatty also notes Wordsworth's *Fenwick Notes* on the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," where he claims that the child's feelings stem from "animal vivacity" (Wordsworth, *Fenwick Notes* 159). Beatty takes "animal" to mean primitive or inferior. Alan Grob expands on this idea, calling the situation "a disclosure of ignorance, [a] dramatization of the meagerness of the child's intellectual resources" (249).

However, this view of childhood is in stark contrast with Wordsworth's philosophy on childhood and innocence expressed throughout his corpus. In discussing "The Idiot Boy," Marian Mead claims that the boy is the hero of the story and that Wordsworth views the child as being simple, unspoiled, and containing heavenly wisdom (193). The text of "We Are Seven" demands a similar interpretation. In the third stanza, he writes:

She had a rustic, woodland air,
And she was wildly clad:
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
—Her beauty made me glad. (lines 9-12)

Wordsworth does not portray her as suffering greatly after her siblings' deaths or as being unable to cope with the harsh reality. Instead, she is connected to nature through her "woodland air" and wild clothes. These aspects of her appearance only demonstrate her beauty. Beatty's claim that Wordsworth is being condescending towards the girl when he speaks about "animal vivacity" is unwarranted. Beatty says, "Wordsworth expressly states that it is because of 'feelings of animal vivacity' that the little girl cannot admit the notion of death" (209). However, this statement is simply not true. In his *Fenwick Note* on the *Intimations Ode*, Wordsworth quotes the opening stanza of "We Are Seven." Speaking there of his own childhood, he says, "But it was not so much from feelings of animal vivacity that my difficulty [of comprehending death] came" (Wordsworth, *Fenwick Notes* 159). Beatty uses this phrase as evidence to support Wordsworth's derogatory view of children; however, the remark appears in Wordsworth's note on

a different poem. He uses the stanza not to comment on the young girl but rather to illustrate his personal difficulty as a child in comprehending death. Additionally, even if Wordsworth was making a specific claim about the girl, the adjective "animal" does not necessarily contain a negative connotation, especially in front of the word "vivacity," which denotes energy and life. Wordsworth never says anything that would paint the young child in a negative light. Hiers notes that certain critics have often under-stressed the power that Wordsworth gives to a child's imagination (10). Ultimately, in "We Are Seven," Wordsworth portrays children as innocent and able to understand concepts in a simplistic way that brings them to the truth. Wordsworth believes in the girl's purity, regardless of whether it is delusion or innocence that is guiding her grief. While the speaker in the poem is focused on catechizing the girl, Wordsworth's corpus would suggest that he no longer perceives her as needing correction (Richardson 861). Instead, his outlook towards the girl is now one of sanctity and innocence.

With Wordsworth's view of the young girl established, we now arrive at a more interesting question. If Wordsworth accurately depicts his interaction with the young girl, what is the historical fact about her grief? Is she denying the truth about her siblings, or is innocence guiding her to work through her misfortune? One approach that has been useful in answering this question is Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of "carnivalized literature." In *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he defines this idea, saying, "Literature that was influenced—directly and without mediation, or indirectly... by one or another variant of carnivalistic folklore we shall call carnivalized literature" (107). The distinguishing factor of carnivalized literature is a tendency away from rigidity and towards "free invention." In other words, the "carnival" does not desire to remain within the bounds of religion but rather moves towards mystical and folkloric interpretations for understanding the world.

In his article "A Folk Attitude in Wordsworth's 'We Are Seven,'" Arthur Moore applies Bakhtin's idea of the "carnival" to argue that the child is representative of a non-Christian, folkloric attitude of death that stresses continued existence whilst in the grave. He allows for the possibility that Wordsworth was unaware of this pagan doctrine but maintains that the child is repeating an idea given to her by her parents—a non-orthodox Christian view of death (261). Similarly, Richardson

argues that the narrator is a poetic representation of the catechetical practices of the Anglican church and that initially, Wordsworth displays the desire to catechize the child (despite not being an Anglican priest) until he later realizes the dangers of restricting the creative freedom of children. Richardson says, "Although the child has duly received some measure of religious instruction, she fails to give her questioner the doctrinal response his question regarding death anticipates. Her refusal to distinguish between dead and living siblings strikes the adult as paganistic" (860). However, Wordsworth later appreciates the "carnival" beliefs of the child. In the discussion of "carnival," much revolves around the historical precedent for these beliefs. While neither Moore nor Richardson provide explicit evidence in support of a specific folklore, the existence of folklore in her region that had a strong view of people living while in the grave is well-documented (Wimberly 49). Moore specifically notes that the child would have adopted the rhetoric and beliefs of those around her; given the prevalence of folklore in the Wye region, she is most likely restating a view of death provided to her by others, specifically a pagan-esque worldview (262).

Moore's and Richardson's arguments lead to the conclusion that, though Wordsworth portrays the child as innocent, her innocence is manifested through the coping mechanism of folklore; however, this emphasis on the "carnival" aspects of the Wye and the catechetical nature of Wordsworth's interactions with the young girl is severely overstated. While the child's beliefs may well be the result of her parents' beliefs (and more specifically, her mother's, given the absence of a father figure in the poem), the assumption that her beliefs are contrary to the English perception of orthodox Christianity and reflect a folkloric worldview is not the only and certainly not the best explanation for the manifestation of the child's innocence.

First, we must consider the sources of the "life in the grave" rhetoric that the girl repeats to the man in the poem. If Wordsworth accurately depicts his interactions with the child, then there is much we can ascertain about the influential voices in her life. In his description of his return to Goodrich Castle in the Wye region, Wordsworth tells us that, in 1843, he attempted to find the girl in one of the surrounding hamlets, but he could not (43). He seems to think that the girl lives in close proximity to Goodrich Castle, and if the girl is unsupervised (as the poem suggests), then she cannot live very far from

the castle. Two details are important to note. Goodrich Castle is associated with St. Giles Church, Goodrich, which is a parish church that owns a glebe and a prominent graveyard (see "Our History"). In addition to this, the young girl mentions living in the church-yard cottage with her mother (line 23). In his article, "Habitations of the Labourer: Improvement, Reform and the Neoclassical Cottage in Eighteenth-Century Britain," Daniel Maudlin discusses how the poor could entreat the church for poverty relief, and they would be given church cottages in the church's glebe in exchange for work (17). This appears to be a notable possibility, given that the girl makes no mention of her father but explicitly mentions her mother twice in lines 24 and 39. Little poetical reason could be given for such a glaring exclusion. She mentions every other person in her family and identifies the house as being her mother's possession. If her mother is a widow with seven children, then petitioning for poverty relief from the church would be a necessity. Cottage residents would likely have been expected to be active in the church, but more importantly, the girl and her mother would have been saturated with and surrounded by Anglican teaching, especially since they were indebted to their local church. The girl also mentions that her siblings are laid in the churchyard (lines 21, 31, 35, and 53). Funeral practices in the Anglican church demanded that, for those who were buried in the churchyard, an Anglican service was required (Rugg and Parsons 7). Therefore, the main source of doctrine would have likely come from the two funeral services that the child would presumably have attended and the words which the priest would have spoken to the girl throughout her grieving process, especially if her family lived close by. The textual evidence from the poem indicates a deep connection to the Anglican church, one that likely defined the thoughts that the girl and her mother would have repeated. Though Moore argues for the child's "carnival" view of death, he maintains that the girl would derive her beliefs from her environment (261). The evidence shows that the environment that formed her beliefs would likely have been a thoroughly Anglican one.

Initially, the idea that the child would have repeated Anglican orthodoxy because of her familiarity with the church seems at odds with the fact that Anglican beliefs of the time did not reflect "life in the grave." Wordsworth portrays himself as attempting to help the girl understand that her siblings are in heaven (lines 65-70),

which would seem to be pitting the child's views against the orthodox view of the afterlife. William Law, a prominent Anglican priest prior to the Romantic period, says about the resurrection, "The corruption of our nature makes mortification, self-denial and the death of our bodies necessary" (Law 43). Though he was not a Gnostic, his sermon on the nature of Christianity contains many similar remarks to this one that emphasize the corruptibility of the body and the detachment that one must have from their physical self to attain the resurrection. The Anglicans of the Romantic period stressed that our bodies are simply a covering for our soul; therefore, the child in "We Are Seven" is not repeating an orthodox Christian doctrine.

Many scholars have argued for this anti-Christian nature of the girl's affirmation (Moore 261; Richardson 860), but this is an oversimplification and even a misinterpretation of Anglican orthodoxy. The next sentence of William Law's sermon mentioned above says, "Because human nature must thus be unmade, flesh and blood must be thus changed before it can enter into the kingdom of Heaven" (43). This phrase echoes 1 Corinthians 15, which says that humans will be changed into a spiritual body at the resurrection. William Paley, a notable Anglican during Wordsworth's lifetime, supports this doctrine in his sermon titled "Of the State after Death," where he says, "First, we shall have bodies" (65). Anglican rhetoric does not always provide a clear and consistent theology on life after death. It was common for preachers at that time to emphasize being raised up in our bodies on judgment day while simultaneously using language that denotes an immediate presence in heaven. Anglicans held that the body was weak, impure, and could not receive salvation without being destroyed, but this does not negate the language that emphasizes a literal, bodily resurrection into new life.

Lastly, further textual evidence supports the notion that the young girl is reflecting an alternate (yet still orthodox) Christian view of death. In lines 50-51, speaking of her sister, she says, "Till God released her of her pain; / And then she went away." One of the difficulties of both Beatty's associationist view and the folkloric view is that neither adequately explains these lines. The young girl attributes her sister's release to God's mercy, strengthening the claim of the surrounding Christian influence on her, and she concedes that her sister "went away." If she is fully living in the grave, like the folklore attitude would suggest, then she never

went away and is only asleep. The best explanation for both her affirmation of God’s presence and the departure yet simultaneous presence of her sister is that this is her innocent attempt to reconcile the Anglican emphasis on bodily resurrection with the rhetoric that her sister has “gone to heaven.” If Moore is correct that the young girl is repeating a historical viewpoint shared by her mother, then her environment of having heard multiple Anglican funerals, having received support from the church, and having been expected to attend church regularly would have led her to repeat her innocent adaptation of the Anglican view of death.

In his article entitled “Innocence,” the philosopher Norvin Richards says, “Perhaps to be innocent... is to be unfamiliar with the very idea of acting in [a certain] way, or to be unaware that there is anything wrong with acting in the way in question because one is similarly unfamiliar with the idea of its being flawed” (158). Richards’s view precisely describes Wordsworth’s depiction of the young girl. Though the child is unaware of her theological contradiction or its potential resemblance to paganistic folklore, her beauty and innocence remind us of the joys of childhood. As John Hiers says in his article, “Wordsworth’s Vision of Childhood: A Call for Reexamination,” “The transcendental mind [of the child] not only unifies, but also inwardly envisions the eternality of all existence” (8). Wordsworth paints the innocence of the young girl, providing hints for the historical reality of her worldview.

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