

Excerpt from *The Prelude*

The Prelude

And in the frosty season, when the sun
 Was set, and visible for many a mile
 The cottage windows through the twilight blaz'd,
 I heeded not the summons: — happy time
 It was, indeed, for all of us; to me
 It was a time of rapture: clear and loud
 The village clock toll'd six; I wheel'd about,
 Proud and exulting, like an untir'd horse,
 That cares not for his home. — All shod with steel,
 We hiss'd along the polish'd ice, in games
 Confederate, imitative of the chace
 And woodland pleasures, the resounding horn,
 The Pack loud bellowing, and the hunted hare.
 So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
 And not a voice was idle; with the din,
 Meanwhile, the precipices rang aloud,
 The leafless trees, and every icy crag
 Tinkled like iron, while the distant hills
 Into the tumult sent an alien sound
 Of melancholy, not unnoticed, while the stars,
 Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west
 The orange sky of evening died away.

William Wordsworth

Sometimes, when we know a lot about a writer, it can be tricky deciding what is relevant to include when writing an essay in exam conditions. Here is a list of contextual points about William Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude*, and this excerpt.

William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth in Cumberland (now Cumbria), on the edge of the Lake District, in 1770.

He was the second oldest of five children and was very close to his brothers and sister, Dorothy, but when their mother, and then their father, died young, the family was split up.

When he was about eight, William and his older brother went to the grammar school in Hawkshead, about 40 miles away from Cockermouth, and stayed in lodgings with a woman called Ann Tyson and her husband.

Esthwaite, a small lake, is near Hawkshead, and may be where the young William learned to skate.

Wordsworth was a keen ice skater for all his life (and he lived until 1850, a good age in those days) When his children were babies he used to put them in a wicker basket and pull them behind him on the ice.

Wordsworth didn't always live in the Lake District (he went to university, although he dropped out) and travelled widely, including to France at the start of the French Revolution, where he had a relationship with a French woman, with whom he had an illegitimate daughter, Caroline.

The subtitle of Wordsworth's long (14 books in its final version) autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, was "the growth of a poet's mind," although it was Mary Hutchinson, William's wife, who gave it its final title. It was never published in Wordsworth's lifetime, and he worked on it for all his life from his twenties until he died.

Wordsworth believed that in our lives there are special moments or experiences (he called them "spots of time") where we can go beyond normal reality and appreciate the wider world of nature. In years to come such "spots of time" when recalled can help us get through difficult times. He believed that nature could almost act as a parent or teacher, in influencing our feelings and behaviour. Several of these "spots of time" are described in *The Prelude*, particularly those dealing with Wordsworth's childhood.

The Prelude was intended to be part of an even longer work, a joint enterprise with Coleridge, fellow poet, and friend, although this never worked out. Wordsworth thought it could be a similar piece of literature to the 17th century *Paradise Lost* by John Milton.

Wordsworth was a Romantic poet, meaning his poetry was occupied with valuing the feelings and experiences of ordinary people, often linked to nature, and expressed in straightforward

language (for its time). He is now often referred to as one of the Lake Poets, as writers often moved to live and work in the Lake District, with its beautiful scenery as inspiration.

Clearly, there is a lot of information here, all interesting and useful in its own way, but how much of it do you think helps a reader get more out of reading this specific ice skating excerpt from *The Prelude*?

Choose what you think are the three or four most important pieces of contextual information (you may need to whittle down a longlist in order to do this) then use these points to write a response to this question:

How does William Wordsworth present nature in the excerpt from *The Prelude*?

Another key theme in this poem is childhood.

Which other poems from the anthology could be linked to this excerpt from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, through the themes of nature and/or childhood? Jot down a list of all the poems you think could link well through these themes.