Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower

POEM TEXT

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.

"She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.

"The floating clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the Storm
Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form
By silent sympathy.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.

"And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to stately height,
Her virgin bosom swell;
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy dell."

Thus Nature spake—the work was done—
How soon my Lucy's race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be.

SUMMARY

Lucy grew up to be three years old, living through sunshine and rain. Then Nature declared, "The world has never grown a lovelier flower than this child. I'll take her into my care and make her into a lady of my very own design.

"I'll give my beloved daughter both guidance and energy. Under my care, this girl—whether on the rocky plains, on the earth or in the sky, in clearings or under the trees—will feel like a guardian of the natural world, able to spark new action or hold it back.

"She'll be as playful as the baby deer that leaps across the lawn or up the mountainside. And she'll be as utterly peaceful, quiet, and calm as the world's inanimate objects.

"The clouds that float by will give her their dignity; the willow tree will bed down for her. She'll never be blind to the grace that's there even in the wildest storms, and that grace will silently shape her body.

"She'll love the midnight stars, and she'll listen to the sound of hidden streams dancing wildly. Her face will become as beautiful as their sounds.

"Lively, energetic joy will make her grow to a dignified height and fill out her youthful figure. I'll give all these thoughts to Lucy while she and I live together in this lovely valley."

That's what Nature said, and it did just what it intended to. But Lucy's life was over so soon! She died, leaving me with only this calm, quiet field, and with my memories of what once was and will never be again.

THEMES

NATURE AND HUMANITY

In "Three Years She Grew," Nature itself falls a little in love with a young girl called Lucy and decides that it's going to raise her to be the perfect woman. The best way it can think of to do that is to model all her charms on its own:

Lucy will be as calm as a stone, as lively as a fawn, and as beautiful as the sound of running water. The poem's speaker, a man who loved Lucy and lost her, altogether agrees that these qualities made her the best sort of person you could possibly be. A life lived close to nature and in imitation of nature, this poem suggests, is a life lived ideally.

The gifts that Nature gives Lucy make her perfectly balanced. Like a fawn, she can be "sportive" (or playful); like a stone, she can enjoy "silence and calm." She's able to find the beauty in "the motions of the Storm" just as easily as she does in the "stars of midnight" or the "murmuring sound" of a hidden stream. She can equally call on her powers "to kindle or restrain," to act when it's right and to stay still when it's right.

All of this delightful equilibrium mirrors Nature's own. In teaching Lucy to be a perfectly balanced and lovely person, Nature is essentially teaching her to be just like Nature. As the natural world makes beauty out of storms and calms, energy and stillness, so will Lucy.

To Nature and the speaker alike, this way of being seems ideal. Though Lucy is gone now, the speaker still loves and remembers her precisely because of her nature-like perfections. Nature, in this poem, is the best teacher, inspiring a mixture of beauty, delight, equilibrium, strength, and intelligence in those wise enough to follow in its footsteps.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

MORTALITY AND GRIEF

The poem's speaker deeply loved someone named Lucy and imagines that she was Nature's own best-beloved child. He can remember all of her qualities—her beauty, her calm, her playfulness—as if she were in front of him even now. Being part of Nature, of course, also means that Lucy is and was part of the cycle of life and death. That fact is more difficult for the speaker to face. Death, in this poem, is both perfectly natural and terribly hard to accept or understand.

Most of the poem recalls how Lucy grew up. Tutored by Nature itself, she became calm, beautiful, happy, and wise, all qualities the speaker remembers tenderly. Clearly, this speaker adored Lucy just as personified Nature did: she was so perfect, in his eyes, that it was as if his beloved English countryside had turned into a living woman.

Only at the end of the poem does the speaker reveal a sad, flat fact: after Nature's "work was done," Lucy died. In one sense, of course, death is the inevitable end of all of Nature's works: nature, having perfected Lucy, finishes the job by taking her back into the earth. But to the speaker, left sitting alone in the "calm, and quiet scene" where Lucy once lived, it feels as if Nature completed its Lucy project far too quickly: "How soon my Lucy's race was run!" he laments. Lucy died too young. Now, haunted by "the memory of what has been, / And never more will be," the speaker can't move on.

Though death is as much a part of nature as beauty and new life, the poem thus suggests, it's the hardest part to swallow. Losing a beloved, especially an all-too-young beloved, is agonizing and bewildering. The speaker can still look on the "heath" (or wild field) that reminds him of Lucy and perhaps even take some comfort in the thought that she's now *part* of the earth in death. But he must also reckon with the fact that, unlike that heath, Lucy won't be coming back good as new in the springtime.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 37-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.

"Three Years She Grew" begins in the childhood of a woman called Lucy—a woman whom readers of Wordsworth might know from the "Lucy" sequence, a series of five poems in which a mysterious speaker mourns the loss of his beloved Lucy and marvels at the strangeness of death. In most of these poems, Lucy is a phantom, a figure the speaker misses deeply but doesn't describe directly. This poem alone gives readers a direct picture of Lucy's loveliness.

In the speaker's vision, Lucy was born special. For the first "three years" of her life, he imagines, she grew "in sun and shower," sprouting up like a little wildflower. By then, he says, Lucy had become so lovely that Nature—personified here as a kindly deity—took notice, and decided to adopt her:

> This Child I to myself will take;
> She shall be mine, and I will make
> A Lady of my own.

Lucy, in other words, was Nature's own child, reared by the land she lived in. Metaphorically speaking, she was that way from the start, a "lovelier flower" than any in the fields. To the speaker—and to Wordsworth, whose poetry often encouraged its readers to "let nature be your teacher"—a person raised by Nature (and amid nature) must inevitably be wise, beautiful, lively, and happy. This poem will tell the story of a person in

harmony with the world, up to and beyond the day of her death.

It will do so in a form rather like a stretched-out ballad:

- Wordsworth often used ballad stanzas: quatrains (or four-line stanzas) whose lines rhyme ABCB. The meter alternates between iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Thus Na- | ture spake— | the work | was done") and iambic trimeter (three iambs, as in "The Girl, | in rock | and plain").
- This poem preserves most of these qualities: it just adds an extra A line and an extra C line in each stanza, creating an AABCCB rhyme scheme. Each stanza thus contains four tetrameter lines, not two.

This shape makes the poem feel like an old folk song wistfully drawn out just a little longer than usual, as if the speaker wants to linger on his memories of Lucy for as long as he can.

LINES 7-12

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.

Nature continues its speech in the second stanza, laying out its plan for Lucy: it will mold her in its own image, making her "a Lady of my own."

This, Nature says, will be a process both rigorous and energetic:

> "Myself will to my darling be
> Both law and impulse: [...]

If Nature is Lucy's "law," she'll act in accordance with its restrictions and limits: she'll obey the law of the seasons, of growth and decay, and of natural balance. If it's her "impulse"—well, that word might mean a few different things.

On one level, the word "impulse" suggests pure energy: Nature will give Lucy its own liveliness and creativity. But Wordsworth also sometimes used the word to mean something like an intuition, a flash of insight. In his famous poem "The Tables Turned," for instance, one of his speakers declares:

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

That "impulse" from the woods is a kind of instinctive understanding, and it goes deeper than the knowledge of any human "sage" (any wise person) could. Nature, then, plans to give Lucy not just its laws and its energy, but its deep and timeless wisdom.

Armed with this collection of limits and powers, Lucy will be the mistress of all she surveys. Listen to the grand parallelism that Nature unrolls here:

> The Girl, in rock and plain,
> In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
> Shall feel an overseeing power
> To kindle or restrain.

Each of these echoing clauses feels like a sweep of Nature's arm, taking in all the world. Lucy will have an "overseeing power" over this landscape, the power to "kindle or restrain"—words that might take readers back to the idea of "law and impulse." Law restrains, impulse kindles, and Lucy will do both, guided by Nature's wisdom.

These lines might suggest that Lucy will be Nature's guardian and keeper as well as its child and creation. Educated by Nature's rhythms, she'll have the strength and insight to care for the world that cares for her.

LINES 13-18

"She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.

Nature's teachings, so far, have had a lot to do with a harmonious balance between contrasting ideas: the restraint of "law" and the creative "kind[ling]" energy of "impulse," for instance. As Nature continues laying out its plans for Lucy, it makes that point even clearer with a pair of vivid images.

First, Nature foretells Lucy's playfulness:

> "She shall be sportive as the fawn
> That wild with glee across the lawn
> Or up the mountain springs;

The simile here presents Lucy as a lively young deer, equally at home playing on a civilized lawn or a wild, rocky mountainside. Her "glee" at being alive, the imagery of the deer's wild leaps suggests, will overflow wherever she goes and whatever she does.

But she won't just be a flibbertigibbet. For balance:

> [...] hers shall be the breathing balm,
> And hers the silence and the calm
> Of mute insensate things.

These striking lines move away from the specificity of the little deer toward a grand, misty vagueness: those "mute insensate things" could be all the rocks and stones and trees in the world, anything that doesn't speak or feel or move. The stillness of these things, the speaker suggests, offers a "breathing balm," words that might equally suggest:

- The stillness of the inanimate world gives people a space to breathe quietly, offering a "balm" (or healing pleasure) to the spirit.
- The inanimate world itself seems to quietly, calmly, soothingly breathe, if you stop to notice.

Once again, Nature declares that Lucy will hold opposite and equal natural beauties in perfect balance. This, the poem suggests, is just what Nature itself does. The still mountainside and the leaping deer are both intrinsic to Nature's nature.

LINES 19-24

"The floating clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the Storm
Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form
By silent sympathy.

Nature goes on: Lucy's perfectly balanced character will put her in tune with whatever she encounters.

She'll gather stately grace from "the floating clouds," just as she gathered playfulness from the deer and calm from the inanimate world. Perhaps she'll get something else, too: if the clouds "their state shall lend" to her, they're offering her their whole way of being. Besides evoking something grand and airy in Lucy's personality, this image might suggest that Lucy will have a fertile imagination. Looking up at the clouds, she might feel for a moment as if she's among them.

She'll also know that it's "for her" that the "willow bend[s]." The trees themselves will seem to bow to her, in other words—or perhaps, she will *feel* that the world is made just as she would like it to be, the willow bending exactly as she prefers it to. Since Lucy is so much Nature's creation, she'll feel that what the natural world does is right and desirable. Her great gift, in this stanza, is attunement to how the world *is*.

Lucy's sense of nature's rightness will extend even to the wild "motions of the Storm," which will only teach her "grace." In fact, the storm "shall mould the Maiden's form," shaping her very body through a "silent sympathy," an unspoken harmony between storm and girl. (You can hear the hiss of the wind and rain in that sibilant "silent sympathy," though.)

Here readers might pause to think: what might it mean to have a body molded by the "motions of the Storm"? This is the wildest image to come along in the imagined landscape so far. Up until now, the poem has taken place in a green and pleasant land of calm lawns, baby deer, and willow trees. When this storm rolls in, it introduces a new breadth to Lucy's character, and especially to her physicality. The power of the storm seems to suggest that she'll be able to contain vast, dangerous energy without becoming overwhelmed. Her "grace" will be in her ability to hold powerful extremes while remaining in balance—again, just as Nature itself does.

Perhaps this storm invites readers to consider the "floating clouds" in a new light, too. They seemed stately and calm then, but perhaps they're just the storm's other face. Again, serenity and wildness both have a rightful place in the world and in Lucy.

LINES 25-30

"The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.

Lucy won't just embody Nature's beauty and balance, Nature goes on. She'll also spend her time *in* nature, taking pleasure in its loveliness, learning more and more from it. The very "stars of midnight" will be her beloved friends, and she'll spend long, sweet hours "lean[ing] her ear" toward "rivulets" (or little streams) hidden "in many a secret place," listening to their music.

Nature spends a long time on this latter image, lovingly personifying the rivulets as they "dance their wayward round" (that is, do their wild, ungoverned dance), making it sound almost as if Lucy has stumbled upon a fairy circle. She'll respond, Nature knows, with pleasure:

> [...] beauty born of murmuring sound
> Shall pass into her face.

These words might suggest two lovely things at once:

- Listening to the waters, Lucy might become beautiful in her joy: the happiness the sound gives her lights her up.
- More mysteriously, the sound of the waters might imbue Lucy's face with its particular beauty, as the storm gave her its power. To look at Lucy's face, then, might be to feel as if *you're* listening to a murmuring stream: tranquil, mesmerized, quietly delighted.

In both of these readings, Lucy won't just be passively shaped by Nature. She'll be in a relationship with it, and she'll learn more and more from it as she grows.

LINES 31-36

"And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to stately height,
Her virgin bosom swell;
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy dell."

Nature at last concludes its plans for Lucy with some more straightforward blueprints for her body. After all the mystical absorption of natural beauty above, there's something sweet and simple about the idea that:

> [...] vital feelings of delight
> Shall rear her form to stately height,
> Her virgin bosom swell;

Lucy, in other words, will grow into the ideal woman of the 19th century: her "vital feelings of delight" will shape a strapping, full-figured, healthy body.

Spend a moment with the words "vital feelings of delight." If something is "vital," it's full of vitality: healthy, lively life energy. But it might also be vital in the sense of "necessary." Delight, this line suggests, is life-giving and terribly important, and not just to intangible things like the emotions or the soul. Delight shapes the body itself. The bright /i/ assonance of "vital" and "delight" makes these telling words chime like little bells.

Notice, too, that Nature here imagines a climax to its work with little Lucy: its plans end with bringing her to full-flowered womanhood. On the one hand, that's a lovely thought, rather as if a new parent were imagining their child graduated from high school and about to fly the nest. On the other hand, ominously, Nature doesn't imagine raising Lucy *beyond* the first flush of her maturity. There's no vision of Lucy as a wise old woman here.

But one would have to be listening very carefully to catch that hint of tragedy to come. Now, Nature just concludes its speech, saying:

> Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
> While she and I together live
> Here in this happy dell."

These words suggest that Nature will help Lucy not just to do and be all the things the poem has described, but to think in the same way that Nature does, *knowing* that it's important to be attuned to the world, to learn from it, to delight in it, to hold its extremes and differences in perfect balance within you. When Nature imagines that Nature and Lucy will "together live," those simple words mean something profound. Lucy will be so close to Nature that she'll *become* Nature, living its life.

This, the poem more than hints, is the ideal way to be. Nature, whether in "sun" or "shower," is a place of perfect, wise, tranquil beauty, and the person who lives in attunement with it is the person living as humanity was meant to.

LINES 37-42

Thus Nature spake—the work was done—
How soon my Lucy's race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be.

Nature's long speech has laid out a grand design for a little girl's life, an education that will make Lucy as delightful, healthy, happy, and wise as Nature itself. No sooner said than done. Listen to the way these lines are shaped:

> Thus Nature spake—|| the work was done—
> How soon my Lucy's race was run!

The breathless caesura there suggests that Nature completes its work in a snap, easy as that. It's the original speaker, now, who's left to marvel at just how quickly that work went. Just as the poem foreshadowed in the previous stanza, Lucy's life was perfectly beautiful—and short. No sooner had she grown to womanhood than Nature finished the job by ending her life.

For there's no better way to be united with the natural world than to die. As Wordsworth himself wrote in another of the Lucy poems, the dead Lucy becomes altogether a part of nature, "rolled round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks, and stones, and trees." In teaching Lucy to be part of Nature, Nature must naturally bring her back into its full embrace: death is at the heart of the "law" Nature spoke of back in the second stanza.

Lucy herself, readers can guess, wouldn't have struggled against this fate, but accepted it as part of the balance of things. The speaker, who clearly loved her, has a more difficult journey to face. The poem's closing lines reflect his bewildered grief:

> She died, and left to me
> This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
> The memory of what has been,
> And never more will be.

In leaving him alone on the silent heath (a wild field), Lucy stays with the speaker in some ways: she's part of that heath, and she's vividly present in his memories. But the very "calm, and quiet scene" of the heath might recall the "silence and the calm / Of mute insensate things" that Lucy learned back in the third stanza. Lucy herself is a "mute insensate thing" now, not present in the way the speaker wants her to be. His soft polyptoton on "what has been, / And never more will be" gets at the incomprehensible finality of death. How can it be that Lucy, who was so beautifully alive, will never be again?

Lucy's complete attunement to Nature, this poem has suggested, made her a deeply lovable person. While the adoring speaker might long to learn from her balance and wisdom, Nature's final hurdle—accepting not just the kindling of vibrant life, but the law of death—is a difficult one to leap. For Lucy, a "lovelier flower" than any on earth, differs from the flowers in one important way: unlike a daffodil or a bluebell, she won't rise up good as new when spring rolls around.

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

By personifying Nature as a mighty but affectionate deity, the poem suggests that the natural world can be a guide, a teacher, and a parent—and that human beings might hope to model themselves on nature's example.

At the beginning of the poem, Nature waits around for a minute to watch little Lucy grow from birth to three years old, sprouting up like a flower through "sun and shower." That's all the time it needs to decide that "she shall be mine, and I shall make / A Lady of my own." Here, Nature becomes an artist, molding Lucy in its own image:

> "Myself will to my darling be
> Both law and impulse: [...]

In other words, Nature makes Lucy into a little copy of itself, giving her both its "law" (its structure and rules) and its creative energy. In fact, Nature's whole personality seems to be about such balances. Being Nature-like, Nature reveals, means having a perfect blend of energy and calm, playfulness and seriousness, joy and wisdom.

Being Nature-like also involves being able to find beauty in troubled places: the wild "motion of the Storm" itself, Nature declares, will only give Lucy more grace. Nature, then, is unflappable. Even the most dangerous energy fits into Nature's grand scheme.

If Nature is loving, wise, and balanced, it's also stern. Its "law" is a law of death as well as life. When Lucy dies, it's as if Nature is completing its work on her by fully absorbing her, literally making her part of itself (an idea that Wordsworth returns to in another of the Lucy poems, "A slumber did my spirit seal").

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower / On earth was never sown;"
- **Lines 4-6:** "This Child I to myself will take; / She shall be mine, and I will make / A Lady of my own."
- **Lines 7-12:** ""Myself will to my darling be / Both law and impulse: and with me / The Girl, in rock and plain, / In earth and heaven, in glade and bower, / Shall feel an overseeing power / To kindle or restrain."
- **Line 28:** "rivulets dance their wayward round,"
- **Lines 34-36:** "Such thoughts to Lucy I will give / While she and I together live / Here in this happy dell.""
- **Line 37:** "Thus Nature spake"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery paints a picture of Lucy's loveliness by describing, not Lucy herself, but her likeness to nature's beauties.

Many of those beauties are quite different from each other, even opposite. When Nature describes Lucy's temperament, for instance, it declares:

> "She shall be sportive as the fawn
> That wild with glee across the lawn
> Or up the mountain springs;
> And hers shall be the breathing balm,
> And hers the silence and the calm
> Of mute insensate things.

The image of a fawn leaping around, "wild with glee," forms a striking contrast with the image of the "silence and the calm / Of mute insensate things"—language so vague that it summons up a whole world's worth of rocks and stones and trees. By juxtaposing youthful, springy motion with vast silent stillness, the images here suggest that Lucy will have a complex range of emotion: she'll be as playful as she is wise, as energetic as she is calm.

Nature plans to give Lucy not just a balanced, lovely personality, but physical beauty:

> [...] she shall lean her ear
> In many a secret place
> Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
> And beauty born of murmuring sound
> Shall pass into her face.

Here, one kind of beauty—the "murmuring sound" of "dancing rivulets"—translates into another, the loveliness of Lucy's face. This almost feels like a moment of synesthesia—as if the *sight* of Lucy's beauty makes the speaker feel as if he hears the refreshing, soothing *sound* of running water.

Nature isn't always so poetical in its plans for Lucy's beauty:

> "And vital feelings of delight
> Shall rear her form to stately height,
> Her virgin bosom swell;

These straightforward images paint the adult Lucy as the model

of an outdoorsy 19th-century beauty: tall, curvaceous, and vigorously healthy.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-18:** ""She shall be sportive as the fawn / That wild with glee across the lawn / Or up the mountain springs; / And hers shall be the breathing balm, / And hers the silence and the calm / Of mute insensate things."
- **Lines 26-30:** "she shall lean her ear / In many a secret place / Where rivulets dance their wayward round, / And beauty born of murmuring sound / Shall pass into her face."
- **Lines 31-33:** ""And vital feelings of delight / Shall rear her form to stately height, / Her virgin bosom swell;"
- **Line 40:** "This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;"

REPETITION

Ringing repetitions make Nature's voice sound like a powerful deity's.

The word "shall" echoes all through the poem as Nature decrees how Lucy will grow: "the stars of midnight shall be dear / To her," "vital feelings of delight / Shall rear her form to stately height," and "she shall be sportive as the fawn." Nature has big plans for Lucy, and the confident diacope on "shall" suggests that it has no doubt it can carry those plans out.

Other flavors of repetition also give the poem musical grandeur. Listen to the parallelism in these lines, for instance:

> The Girl, in rock and plain,
> In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
> Shall feel an overseeing power
> To kindle or restrain.

The repeated sentence structure here makes it feel like Nature is taking in the whole world with three great sweeps of its arm.

The anaphora here does something similar:

> And hers shall be the breathing balm,
> And hers the silence and the calm
> Of mute insensate things.

That stately repetition sounds almost biblical, and it evokes the sheer abundance of calm wisdom that Nature intends to offer Lucy.

The speaker's repetitions at the end of the poem are quieter and sadder:

> This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
> The memory of what has been,
> And never more will be.

The anaphora of "this" makes it feel as if the speaker is gesturing around at the empty heath, stressing just how sadly quiet it is. Finally, sadly, the polyptoton on "been" and "be" underscores the speaker's tragedy: he remembers all too well how things once were when Lucy was alive and knows all too well that they'll never be that way again.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "in rock and plain, / In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,"
- **Line 11:** "Shall"
- **Line 13:** "shall"
- **Line 14:** "across the lawn"
- **Line 15:** "up the mountain"
- **Line 16:** "And hers," "shall"
- **Line 17:** "And hers"
- **Line 19:** "shall"
- **Line 21:** "shall"
- **Line 23:** "shall"
- **Line 25:** "shall"
- **Line 26:** "shall"
- **Line 30:** "Shall"
- **Line 32:** "Shall"
- **Line 40:** "This," "this"
- **Line 41:** "been"
- **Line 42:** "be"

ALLITERATION

Gentle touches of alliteration give the poem some quiet music.

When Nature first turns its attention to Lucy, for instance, it declares:

> This Child I to myself will take;
> She shall be mine, and I will make
> A Lady of my own.

The murmuring /m/ and soft /sh/ alliteration here makes Nature, for all its power, sound like a tender, soft-spoken parent. More /m/ sounds will show up all through the poem, making Nature's voice hum like a breezy meadow or a bee-haunted flower bush. The same quiet sounds creep into the speaker's voice, too:

> She died, and left to me
> This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
> The memory of what has been,
> And never more will be.

Here, the musical, interweaving /m/ and /b/ alliteration makes the speaker's grief feel quiet, soft, and familiar, not violent.

Elsewhere, more pronounced alliteration draws attention to some of the gifts that Nature, like a fairy godmother, bestows

on Lucy. The "breathing balm"—the airy, soothing quality—of the natural world's "mute insensate things" (rocks and stones and trees, for example) sounds solemn and grand because of that alliterative /b/ sound. And the soft sibilant "silent sympathy" Lucy will feel with the "motions of the Storm" suggests that Lucy, attuned to nature, will preserve her inner quiet even in the midst of a howling gale.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "myself"
- **Line 5:** "She shall," "mine," "make"
- **Line 6:** "my"
- **Line 7:** "Myself," "my"
- **Line 8:** "me"
- **Line 13:** "She shall"
- **Line 16:** "breathing balm"
- **Line 22:** "motions"
- **Line 23:** "mould," "Maiden's"
- **Line 24:** "silent sympathy"
- **Line 28:** "rivulets," "round"
- **Line 29:** "beauty born"
- **Line 36:** "Here," "happy"
- **Line 38:** "race," "run"
- **Line 41:** "memory," "been"
- **Line 42:** "more," "be"

VOCABULARY

Sown (Line 3) - Planted.

Impulse (Line 8) - Spontaneous feeling, motivating energy.

Kindle (Line 12) - Start, spark.

Sportive (Line 13) - Playful.

Glee (Line 14) - Intense happiness.

Balm (Line 16) - Something soothing or calming.

Mute insensate things (Line 18) - Things that don't speak or feel.

State (Line 19) - Nature, way of being. This might also suggest that the clouds will give Lucy their stateliness, their dignity.

Wayward round (Line 28) - Their unpredictable, wandering dance.

Vital (Line 31) - Enlivening.

Dell (Line 36) - A little wooded valley.

Spake (Line 37) - Spoke.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

One of the longer of Wordsworth's Lucy poems, "Three Years She Grew" is also the only poem in the series that describes Lucy herself in much detail. (Most of the other Lucy poems present her as more of a phantom or a shadow, focusing on the speaker's grief at losing her.) Over the course of its seven sestets (or six-line stanzas), the poem evokes Lucy's grace, wisdom, cheer, and calm by picturing her as Nature's own child.

These sestets almost feel like expanded ballad stanzas:

- The ballad stanza uses an ABCB rhyme scheme and uses four lines, alternating between iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm: "And hers | shall be | the breath- | ing balm") and iambic trimeter (three iambs: "A La- | dy of | my own").
- This poem's stanzas have a lot of these same features but introduce extra lines of iambic tetrameter: *two* four-beat lines alternate with a three-beat line, so that the rhymes run AABCCB.

The overall effect is of a ballad stanza drawn out, long and thoughtful. It's as if the speaker is trying to stretch out his reminiscences of Lucy just a little longer, since her "race was run" all too quickly.

METER

"Three Years She Grew" uses a mixture of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. All the lines are built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, but some use four iambs (tetrameter) and some use three (trimeter).

Here's how that sounds in lines 13-15:

"She shall | be sport- | ive as | the fawn
That wild | with glee | across | the lawn
Or up | the moun- | tain springs;

This form feels rather as if an extra couple of tetrameter lines were added to ballad meter. Ballad stanzas, an old shape inherited from folk songs, were important to Wordsworth, part of his ethical as well as his poetic project. He and his collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge called their groundbreaking joint collection *Lyrical Ballads* because they felt that simple, earthy, accessible language (the "ballad" part) could better express intense feeling and thought (the "lyrical" part) than ornate, highfalutin verse could.

By playing with a familiar shape in his meter, Wordsworth thus makes Lucy's tale sound at once timeless and intensely personal.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's rhyme scheme runs like this:

AABCCB

This pattern creates a steady, breathing, pulsing motion in the lines. Each B rhyme lands on a shorter line of iambic trimeter, making the stanzas feel gently expectant: there's a little hush before the poem moves on to close the rhyme.

The rhyme scheme here also feels like an expansion of good old ballad rhyme, which runs ABCB. The extra rhymes make it feel rather as if the speaker is stalling a little, trying to stretch out his lovely memories of Lucy's youth for as long as possible before he hits the inescapable end of her story.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is the same mysterious figure who appears in all the Lucy poems: a quiet, thoughtful, grief-stricken watcher, with a personality and life history not unlike Wordsworth's own.

Most of the poem, however, is told in the voice of Nature itself. Nature watches Lucy grow up for "three years" before deciding to make a special project of her; readers get the sense that Lucy must have been *born* special for Nature to take such an interest. Once it's chosen Lucy, Nature speaks like a deity, declaring that it will mold its adoptive daughter in its own image: Lucy will be playful as a fawn, calm as a stone, stately as a cloud.

The speaker confidently reports on how Nature must have nurtured Lucy, as if he had a special power of insight. But he has no power to bring Lucy back now that she's gone. What Nature molded, he laments, Nature took away.

SETTING

By all indications, "Three Years She Grew" is set in Wordsworth's native English countryside—and more specifically, in the Lake District, the region he lived in for much of his life. The images of rocky plains, leafy glades, dancing streams, and soaring clouds all call to mind the particular beauties of this area, whose hills and valleys Wordsworth tirelessly explored.

The landscape Wordsworth loved seems to love people back, here: a personified, adoring Nature becomes Lucy's foster parent and tutor. Under Nature's guiding hand, Lucy won't develop, say, the ferocity of a jagged icy mountain, but the sweet glee of a little deer and the loveliness of a tiny hidden stream. "Even the motions of the Storm," as the speaker says, feel graceful in such a landscape and will give Lucy their grace in turn.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote "Three Years She Grew" in 1799, early in his revolutionary poetic heyday. Alongside his friend and collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth kicked off the English Romantic movement with the 1798 book *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection that proclaimed poetry should use everyday, earthy language (that's the "ballad" part) to explore the depths of the soul and the imagination (the "lyrical" part).

These were very new ideas in the 18th century, whose most prominent writers (like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope) were more interested in satirical, elegant wit than plainspoken sincerity. But Wordsworth's and Coleridge's innovations would change poetry forever. Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," for example, meditated on nature and memory in a way that was completely novel in its time—and has now become a perfect example of what readers *expect* poetry to do.

Wordsworth published "Three Years She Grew" in the 1800 second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. It's one of the five "Lucy poems," a sequence dealing with a speaker's grief over a mysterious beloved. There's no critical consensus about whether the "Lucy" the poems mourn was based on a real person. But one theory is that these poems might in part express Wordsworth's sorrow over his fraught relationship with Coleridge. The two men, along with Wordsworth's brilliant sister Dorothy, shared a short period of intense creative inspiration. For a few magical years, they lived and worked closely together, going for long walks, discussing literature, and composing poetry.

But Wordsworth and Coleridge were very different. Wordsworth was disciplined, arrogant, and fully persuaded of his own genius; Coleridge was erratic, inspired, and insecure, prone to addictions and hopeless loves. After the pair's brief period of shared genius, they drifted apart: Wordsworth grew frustrated with Coleridge's moods and frenzies, and Coleridge was heartbroken by Wordsworth's rejection.

A flashpoint in the relationship came when Wordsworth published the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800. By this time, Wordsworth was conscious of his status as a public poet—and of his and Coleridge's stylistic disagreements. He revised *Lyrical Ballads* to play down Coleridge's contributions, even taking Coleridge's name off the title page. This was the first in a long series of blows, disagreements, and misunderstandings that would erode the pair's friendship.

But the great collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge lives beyond "the touch of earthly years." Their work was a major inspiration to younger Romantic poets like John Keats and to future generations of writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth's poetry was part of a Romantic backlash against the elegant, satirical, and often merciless clarity of the Age of Enlightenment. This period of the 18th century was marked by huge scientific advances, but also by what the later Romantics saw as a bit too much reason. Where earlier Renaissance scholars and artists tried to know a little bit about everything, Enlightenment thinkers were categorizers and organizers, increasingly interested in sharp divisions between disciplines—and increasingly confident in their ability to unravel all the world's mysteries, given enough time.

The art of that era, similarly, had an orderly, reasoned wit that Wordsworth and his contemporaries began to find rather deadening. Romantics like William Blake and John Keats wanted to break out of the crystalline prison of Enlightenment-era poetry, preferring the wide, dark, glimmering world of the imagination. The godlike Nature of this poem is Romantic to the core, suggesting as it does that the world contains wisdom above and beyond what the human intellect can reach on its own steam.

The Romantic movement was also in part a rebellion against the Industrial Revolution, which was built on the back of Enlightenment advances in science and technology. As the countryside began to disappear beneath expanding cities and filthy factories, thinkers like Wordsworth tried to remind readers that nature was full of irreplaceable beauty and wisdom—qualities that can't be commodified. Presenting Lucy as an idealized embodiment of Nature itself, the speaker here suggests that the natural world contains all the wisdom, goodness, and pleasure a human being needs.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/rg5HtuBKLC4)
- Lyrical Ballads — See images from the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, the important collection in which this poem first appeared. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/lyrical-ballads-1800-edition)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Wordsworth's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- More on the Lucy Poems — Read a New Yorker article discussing Wordsworth's strange, haunting Lucy poems. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/05/strange-fits-of-passion)
- Wordsworth's Legacy — Visit the Wordsworth Society to learn more about Wordsworth's continuing influence. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Complaint
- A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Expostulation and Reply
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free
- I Travelled Among Unknown Men
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- Mutability
- My Heart Leaps Up
- Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room
- Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- She was a Phantom of Delight
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

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