

Notes on *She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways* by William Wordsworth:

“*She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways*” by William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is a Romantic poem by one of the founders of English Romanticism. The poem celebrates an admired girl or young woman (a “Maid”) by associating her with the beauties of nature. Both in its topic and its method, the poem is a prototypical representative piece of Romantic writing. Other common Romantic traits of this work include its relatively simple, straightforward language; its emphasis on the personal, emotional expression of a particular speaker; its concern with rural life; its freedom from references to classical mythology (such as were often used in earlier poetry); and its short, lyric form.

Right from line one, the speaker introduces “She,” his subject of affection. Only much later in the work, however, do we discover that this “She” has a specific name: “Lucy” (10). She is less important, though, as a particular, precisely individualized person than as a symbol of any beloved female. Although this poem is part of a series of lyrics by Wordsworth involving “Lucy,” she remains more a “type” of character than an individual with a highly specific personality of her own. She is more important as the object of the speaker’s feelings than as a complicated subject in her own right. The poem, as it turns out, is indeed as much about the speaker as it is about the woman he praises.

No sooner is the woman’s presence established by the poem’s first word than we immediately sense that something has changed. No sooner, that is, do we read “She” than we read “dwelt” (past tense). Why is she no longer dwelling? Has she moved? Has something bad happened to her? We later learn, of course, that she is dead, but, for the moment, the word “dwelt” merely raises questions.

The fact that the woman dwelled among “untrodden” ways is significant. Her surroundings, apparently, were rural; she was a figure of the country rather than the city. Romantic poets in general—and Wordsworth in particular—often saw the country as a place of virtue and the city as a place of vice, and so we can expect that the speaker will be sympathetic toward (rather than dismissive of) a young woman living in the countryside. Presumably she was not only a rural woman but a woman of relatively modest circumstances, and it is partly the fact that she represents the common folk of rural England that will make her attractive both to the speaker and to Wordsworth.

Wherever it was that she “dwelt” in the countryside, it was in a place (or places) not frequently visited. Notice, then, what this fact implies about the speaker: he, somehow, has visited her dwelling place; he, somehow, has had the chance to know and appreciate her, and now he shares that privilege with the reader. The poem will imply that she was somehow a particularly intriguing person, but the poem will also imply that the speaker himself was capable of valuing a human being who might easily have been overlooked or ignored by others.

The fact that the “Maid” dwelled “Beside the springs of Dove” (2) is intriguing for several reasons. First, the word “springs” immediately associates her with life and purity—with freely running, clear water emerging from the earth. Thus in all these ways she is associated with the beauty and vitality of nature.