

Finding Hopeful Possibilities in a Divided World

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So much in our world, in our society, focuses on the negative. Fragmentation and division are evident through noisy, omnipresent opposing political viewpoints blazing on social media, anger directed to and received from hate groups, and a pandemic that has torn apart the lives of so many. It is not surprising that we continually ponder these questions: What *is* positive—and *where* is it? So we search for Truth, or for what we hope to be true—but where? It is a highly regarded observation that our lives are influenced by what we read. Sometimes, through the pages of great literature, the human being is explained more fully, and certainly differently, than through the pages of the most reputable anatomy textbook. Will Schwalbe argues that reading is the best way to examine our lives and learn about ourselves and the world around us; from reading we can gain “life-guiding wisdom.”¹ A timeless art, poetry, as well as other types of writing, often provides answers or at least insightful reflections on the meaning of life and, more specifically, on ways to assess and to ameliorate our troubles. In an essay entitled “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Robert Frost says that a poem is “a momentary stay against the confusion of the world”; and there he also argues that “a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.”² Suffering is something we all share, but what we do *after* or *during* or *because of* the suffering and pain of life is paramount. As human beings, we need reassurance and hope, we long for delight, and we search for wisdom that sustains. We want relief from the rancor, strife, incivility, and division. The purpose of this brief study is to survey a few pieces of literature,

¹ Will Schwalbe, *Books for Living: Some Thoughts on Reading, Reflecting, and Embracing Life* (New York: Knopf, 2016), 11.

² Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” from *Collected Works* (1939). Retrieved from www.poeticous.com/frost/the-figure-a-poem-makes#google_vignette.

mostly poetry, that speak to the universal human condition, that specifically provide promises of hope through the appreciation of beauty and the natural world, the possibilities of love, and the worthwhile meaning of suffering. There is, thankfully, a flip-side to life's struggles, darkness, and pain—and searching literature for answers can only aid us in our quest to find meaning and to move closer to peace and harmony.

So what if civilization is harsh, uncaring, unmanageable? Then find solace, find peace, away from it! As Geri Giebel Chavis states in *Poetry and Story Therapy: The Healing Power of Creative Expression*, the English Romantic poets' strong messages affirm "poetry's power to guide, illuminate, and heal."³ William Wordsworth noted in the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" in 1802 that "the primary laws of our nature"⁴ are to be found in a series of poems compiled by himself and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In many of these poems, both poets urge the human being to find hope in the *natural world*. The thought of humans' treatment of their fellow human beings might bring despair, but a study of the teachings from nature can yield peace and joy. In his "Lines Written in Early Spring,"⁵ Wordsworth asserts that "Nature's holy plan" (line 22) causes him to "lament/What man has made of man" (lines 23–24). In "The Tables Turned,"⁶ Wordsworth begs the reader to note the "sweet lore" of Nature (line 25) and to bring "a heart/That watches and receives" (lines 31–32). He begs the reader to "feel" the Powers in this world that come only when we allow those Powers to impress upon our minds. He notes the absolute bliss that results when the connections between the natural world and the individual are realized:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,

³ Geri Giebel Chavis, *Poetry and Story Therapy: The Healing Power of Creative Expression* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2011), 21.

⁴ William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 1438.

⁵ William Wordsworth, "Lines Written in Early Spring," in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 257.

⁶ William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 258–259.

They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,
 And dances with the daffodils.⁷

Although some readers may think dancing daffodils to be a silly image for helping one navigate the waters of a hostile world, we must remember that Wordsworth is linking the imaginative and the creative and thereby presenting the impact of a past experience. As Heidi Thomson states in “Why Romantic Poetry Still Matters,” the unexpected gift Wordsworth receives from revisiting in his mind the wind-blowing daffodils equals the “pleasure of processed experience,”⁸ what he identifies in the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” as a pleasant representation of “emotion recollected in tranquility.”⁹

Wordsworth’s poetry spills over with the joy we can receive from “low and rustic” types¹⁰—from beggars, shepherds, an old leech-gatherer, one who symbolizes “human strength.”¹¹ The natural person, to Wordsworth, is not the person of society who is entrapped and defined by rules, or encumbered by political beliefs, or harassed in social media, but man or woman as he or she was meant to be—as one who can experience joy through the natural world.

For all the English Romantics, nature, the natural world, was a symbol of becoming and of bliss, an anodyne to the harshness of the world. For Shelley, the skylark, that “blithe Spirit,”¹² sings a song of beauty and serves as a symbol of concealed loveliness in the changing world of the pre-industrial revolution. For the poet

⁷ William Wordsworth, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 324–335, lines 19–24.

⁸ Heidi Thomson, “Why Romantic Poetry Still Matters,” *Romanticism* 26, no. 3 (2000): 40.

⁹ William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 1447.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1438.

¹¹ William Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 312–314, line 112.

¹² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “To a Skylark,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 408–409, line 1.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the frost at midnight clarifies the meaning of a life away from “the great city”¹³ where sky and stars appear invisible. For Coleridge, the goal, achieved through the natural world, is to see and hear that “eternal language, which...God/utters.”¹⁴ For John Keats, the one who longed for permanence in a world of change, the beauty of nature captured forever in art, specifically in natural scenes depicted on a Grecian urn, becomes truth—“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”¹⁵—a message Keats says is all we need to know on earth. And we cannot forget the Romantic precursor William Blake, who appeared to be able to see “a World in a Grain of Sand/And Heaven in a Wild Flower.”¹⁶

And back to Wordsworth—It is perhaps most through his famous autobiographical poem “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”¹⁷ where he asserts most emphatically the solace that can come from the natural world. For Wordsworth, nature is the anchor. Even after a period of five years since Wordsworth had originally visited Tintern Abbey on the banks of the Wye River, *memories* of the natural world, he writes, can “chasten and subdue” (line 93), can lighten the burden of the “unintelligible world” (line 40), can even show that there is “abundant recompense” (line 88) for the trials of a harsh world. Wordsworth’s words here communicate passion for the ameliorating effects of the natural world:

. . . For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh not grating, though of ample power

¹³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 408–409, line 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 60–61.

¹⁵ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1193–1194, line 49.

¹⁶ William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 222–224, lines 1–2.

¹⁷ William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 259–260.

To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thought; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man. (lines
 88–99)

For William Wordsworth, the natural world is the anchor, the guide, the nurse, and the joy, and as such it is an enormous uplift.

A few years later, in 1877, Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote the poem “God’s Grandeur”¹⁸ to continue this idea about how natural loveliness combats human discord. In this poem, although the flaming, great beauty of the world is offset by the carelessness of humankind as people waste and malign the natural world, Hopkins states unequivocally that no matter what man does, “nature is never spent” (line 9) and that there is comfort in the “dearest freshness deep down things” (line 10) and hope in the Holy Ghost, who is brooding over a “bent” world (line 13).

If inner peace can result from these connections with the natural world, so too can joy come from connections with other people. Literature overflows with uplifting human possibilities initiated by human interaction and often deepened through love. John Donne, in his 17th-century short devotion “Meditation XVII,”¹⁹ sets up the idea, words we all have always heard, that “no man is an island” and that, consequently, the basis for humankind’s finding hope and peace is human connection. In this short prose piece, Donne emphasizes ideas that resonate throughout poetry. He poses the questions: “Who casts not his eye to the sun when it rises?. . . Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings?”²⁰ In other words, we must realize our human *oneness*.

¹⁸ Gerald Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 101.

¹⁹ John Donne, “Meditation XVII,” *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 627–628.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

In his well-known autobiographical poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,”²¹ Donne emphasizes how this authentic connection between two people can become their strength, their vision, and their sustaining posture in an otherwise joyless world. This famous compass poem reveals, through an elaborate mathematical metaphor comparing human connection to the two parts of a compass, the idea that two people can be as one. As one part of the compass obliquely runs, the firmness of the “fixed foot” (line 27) anchors the outward journey (Donne’s leaving his wife in England to go to France), as the two are really *one*. Donne explains the connection of the two souls in this way:

Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.
And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home. (lines 27–32)

Donne concludes the poem with this affirmation: “Thy firmness makes my circle just/ And makes me end where I begun” (lines 35–36). In a world focused so much on appearance, on the shallow and the superficial, the authentic connection between two people becomes a stay against confusion and deceit and disharmony.

This involvement in humankind, this collectiveness, finds voice consistently throughout Shakespeare, maybe most notably in his famous “Sonnet 116.”²² This poem announces the “marriage of true minds”—and this “marriage” sustains. This type of union gives depth and direction; the connection provides an anchor. It is the “ever-fixed mark” (line 5); it is the “star to every wandering bark” (line 7); it is what moves one beyond “impediments” (lines 2) and “alteration” (line 3).

Literature abounds with answers to questions about how to combat a hateful world through meaningful human connection. It

²¹ John Donne, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 611–612.

²² William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 116,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 503–504.

is in Robert Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays"²³ just the *memory* of what good things the speaker's father did for his son growing up that has taught the son the meaning of love in action. This inner peace is what Richard Lovelace²⁴ meant when he said that "Stone walls do not a prison make/ Nor iron bars a cage" (lines 25–26). Freedom in love and soul escapes the confines of an imprisoning society. And perhaps one of the most poignant and gripping statements in poetry of how a sorrowful modern, mechanized society is countered by meaningful human connection comes in Matthew Arnold's famous love poem "Dover Beach."²⁵ As two people stand alongside the English coast and lament upon "human misery" (line 18) and the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" (line 25) of the Sea of Faith, the poem ends with the only affirmation being the connection between two people:

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night. (lines 29–37)

Clearly, as shown so often in literature from all ages, finding peace in the natural world and meaning in human connections counters the division and discord that continually invade our lives. But what if these two solutions covered here are just not enough? What about the darkness, the suffering, that is an innate part of our human condition? The truth is that we *all* endure pain; we *all* suffer. The given is that we experience suffering—publicly sometimes and privately always. Can anything positive result from this human pain?

²³ Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 867–868.

²⁴ Richard Lovelace, "To Althea, from Prison," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 671–672.

²⁵ Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 2090–2091.

Perhaps the big question is how we find hope, optimism, actually *because of* the suffering to which we just *must* be heir.

For some enlightenment on this concept of suffering and ways suffering can actually sustain us at times, let us return briefly to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." We know already that Wordsworth found consolation in the natural world. But within this poem he also addresses the problem of human pain—as revealed through "thoughtless youth," "the dreary intercourse of daily life," "evil tongues," "rash judgments," the "sneers of selfish men," and a "world where no kindness is" (lines 128–130). Clearly, for Wordsworth the natural world can also *heal*; it can prevent all of the above from disturbing our "cheerful faith" (line 133), and it can enable us to see, Wordsworth writes, a world actually "full of blessings" (line 134). It is the presence of the natural world—in its constancy and its "sweet sounds" (line 142)—that leads to "healing thoughts" (lines 144) and a feeling of unity in disunity.

As we move to a later poem where darkness is literally all around, Robert Frost's most famous "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,"²⁶ the traveler appears weary with this world. This very simple-on-the-surface poem contains perhaps one of the strongest statements ever made on how we address the darkness in our lives. On this, the "darkest evening of the year" (line 8), the speaker thinks about staying to "watch the woods fill up with snow" (line 4) and to lose himself, somehow, in "the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake" (lines 11–12). As one source has put it, life obviously has some "complex chains" upon the persona.²⁷ Yet—and *this is the main point*—the persona here changes course with thoughts of "promises to keep" (line 14). We do not know how or why. Maybe the decision has not been an easy one—because Frost repeats the line stating the speaker's realization that he has "miles to go before I sleep" (lines 15–16). However, as Perrine and Arp state, it is the "promises" here, the responsibilities, that take precedence.²⁸ Sometimes it *is* within the darkness of life where we see the light shining on the road ahead.

²⁶ Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 255.

²⁷ Lawrence Perrine and Thomas Arp, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 8th ed., (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 134.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Perhaps it is in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's famous poem "Ulysses"²⁹ where we see most clearly the positive ends that can result from years of suffering. The Greek warriors of whom Tennyson writes are weary, so weary. After the Trojan War and after a ten-year journey home, the aged Ulysses/Odysseus has returned to his homeland of Ithaca as King and to his wife Penelope and son Telemachus. But what being King of Ithaca meant before Odysseus's trials is not what being King of Ithaca means now. The transformed Odysseus is now a man sobered and enlightened and educated by the trials he has endured, and what is meaningful for him is just different from what was once meaningful in his life. Odysseus states:

I am a part of all that I have met;
 Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
 Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
 Forever and forever when I move.
 How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
 To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
 As though to breathe were life! . . .
 Little remains; but every hour is saved
 From that eternal silence, . . . (lines 18–26)

The choice is his to leave his kingdom under the leadership of his son and to pursue what his warrior life has taught him is important: the never-ending search for knowledge. Although Odysseus knows that death is imminent, it is the struggle-filled journey that holds meaning. In his old age, he states that it is "not too late to seek a newer world" (line 57), and he assesses the meaning of life now with these powerful words:

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we
 are—
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (lines
 65–70)

²⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 1929–1930.

Perhaps the most positive attribute about great literature is that it is universal. It speaks to us because it mirrors our common human condition—this human-ness that often equals a painful existence. Conflicts from without and from within plague us. We search for answers; we long for meaning when, as Wordsworth puts it in a sonnet by the same title, “the world is too much with us.”³⁰ The divisive, clanging world is nothing new. Whether we, as this study has surveyed, find joy through nature, through connections with other people, or whether we just take the time to assess how our hardships “grow” us, literature can direct us if we let it; at the very least, it can provide a lens for how to view and to survive this harsh world. Peter Orner refers to literature’s magical ability to communicate with us as “alchemy.”³¹ An image from Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Fish”³² effectively closes these ponderings. In this poem the fisherperson finally hooks the “tremendous fish” (line 1). The prize is an old, “battered,” “homely” (lines 8–9), sullen-faced, yellow-eyed fish covered with white sea-lice, with a lip carrying five pieces of hanging fish line. The speaker, who sits in the boat in the oily rainbow-colored water and continues to stare and stare at this prize, experiences an epiphany. Those “five old pieces of fish-line” (line 51) suddenly become “medals with their ribbons” (line 61), a “five-haired beard of wisdom/trailing from his aching jaw” (lines 63–64). A *different* feeling of “victory/filled up the little rented boat” (lines 66–67), Bishop writes, and the poem ends with these words:

. . . everything
Was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go. (lines 73–75)

Sometimes it may just be that victory comes from our ability to search out and find beauty and higher meaning in the ugliness—and literature can help us wade through these murky waters.

³⁰ William Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much with Us,” in *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 317, line 1.

³¹ Peter Orner, *Am I Alone Here? Notes on Living to Read and Reading to Live* (Boca Raton, FL: Catapult, 2016), xiv.

³² Elizabeth Bishop, “The Fish,” in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 820–821.