Intertextuality and the context of reception: 
*Intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood* - Stanzas 1-5 by William Wordsworth

**Lesson plan**

**Resources**
- Copies of the poem
- Highlighters
- **Resource A** – Film Clip of *Imitations*
- **Resource B** – Extract from *Imitations* with corresponding Bible passages

**Learning objectives**
- To study and understand the meaning of the opening of the poem (stanzas 1-5)
- To explore Wordsworth’s spiritual beliefs and use of biblical imagery

**Starter activity – considering childhood and growing up**
- Discuss: When you were little, what did you want to be when you grew up?
  - What were the things that excited you and that you hoped for most?
  - How is life different now?
  - Does any part of you wish you could return to a time of childhood innocence, when the most important things in life were a new Barbie and watching cartoons?
  - Is getting older harder?
  - Why?

**Intro – reading and understanding the poem**
- In the poem, Wordsworth reflects on the way he would normally see things and the pleasure he used to - or ought to - find on earth, but now things seem less ‘glorious’ to him. Speculate on why this might be. (E.g. is he just getting older and more cynical, has he had some bad experience, does life just teach us that things aren’t as good as they seem when we’re little, etc.?)
  - Read the poem stanzas 1-4 (lines 1-48) and establish the basic story (i.e. Wordsworth looks around and feels differently about the world).
  - Students identify words of whose meaning they are unsure and ask each other, then the teacher, for help.

**Main activity 1 – paired work on identifying contrasts**
- Working in pairs and using two different colour highlighters, students identify:
  - The pleasure Wordsworth would normally take in the world (i.e. the positives)
  - How Wordsworth is tempted to see the world now (less positive)
  - For example:
THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
   The earth, and every common sight,
       To me did seem
   Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
   Turn wheresoe'er I may,
       By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

   The rainbow comes and goes,
       10    And lovely is the rose;
   The moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
   Waters on a starry night
       15    Are beautiful and fair;
   The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth.

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
   20    And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
    And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;   25
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the echoes through the mountains throng,
The winds come to me from the fields of sleep;
    And all the earth is gay;
   Land and sea

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Give themselves up to jollity,  
And with the heart of May  
Doth every beast keep holiday;—  
Thou Child of Joy,  
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy  
Shepherd-boy!  

Ye blessed creatures, I have heard the call  
Ye to each other make; I see  
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;  
My heart is at your festival,  
My head hath its coronal,  
The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.  

While Earth herself is adorning,  
This sweet May-morning,  
And the children are culling  
On every side,  
In a thousand valleys far and wide,  
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,  
And the babe leaps up on his mother's arm:—  
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!  
—But there's a tree, of many, one,  
A single field which I have look'd upon,  
Both of them speak of something that is gone:  
The pansy at my feet  
Doth the same tale repeat:  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

- Working in pairs, students sum up:
  - What sorts of things Wordsworth would normally take pleasure in (i.e. natural things and creatures, the beauty of creation, etc. - very typical of Wordsworth and the Romantic poets)

- How Wordsworth is tempted to feel now (i.e. takes less pleasure, feels grief, sees loss of glory, what he formerly felt was just a 'vision' or 'dream', etc.)

- Then feed back ideas to class. Consider:
  - Is there any sense of a 'turning point' in the poem
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which could explain Wordsworth’s changed feelings?
(see line 52 – a tree)
- Speculate what this could be about.

Main activity 2 –
Wordsworth’s rationale/the concept of pre-existence
❖ Explain: The first four stanzas of the poem were written in 1802 as part of a collection of poems about childhood. This movement of the poem ends with two unanswered questions. Later, in 1804, Wordsworth added another 7 stanzas to complete the poem and answer the rhetorical questions.
- Read stanza 5 lines 59-77 and then discuss the following questions and make notes on the poem:
  - According to the poem, where was the soul before birth? (lines 61-62 and 65-66) (Explain that Wordsworth believes that before being born as a baby, a human soul is with God. This belief is called ‘pre-existence’ i.e. that human souls exist before birth. If you have Philosophy and Ethics students in the class, they might be able to make links to Platonic conceptions)
  - What then happens to the soul as the person grows up? (lines 67-77). Track the stages of what happens (i.e. born in a godly state but soon affected by the ‘prison house’ of being born on earth; a growing child takes pleasure in the world; a youth, though further removed from his original heavenly state, is still described as ‘Nature’s priest’; but a grown person no longer experiences the same joy in nature)
  - To what extent does this explain Wordsworth’s melancholy in the first four stanzas?
  - Do we understand how he feels that, as he gets older, he loses his connection to God and his appreciation of nature?
  - Can we now begin to answer the rhetorical questions he asks at the end of stanza 4?
  - Without necessarily subscribing to Wordsworth’s belief in pre-existence, can we relate to the idea that as you get older, you become further removed from taking pleasure in nature?

Main activity 3 – exploring links to the Bible
❖ Wordsworth’s spiritual beliefs as expressed in the poem can be partly understood by considering his use of biblical imagery. Watch the film clip [Resource A] in conjunction with the handout [Resource B].
- Students use arrows, highlighters and annotations to make links between the Bible references and the ideas in the poem.
- Discuss:
  - What biblical basis does Wordsworth have for considering that adults have lost their original innocence and ability to enjoy God’s creation?
  - What biblical evidence does Wordsworth have that children are somehow closer to God’s heart?
  - How do the biblical references help us to make sense of Wordsworth’s ideas and beliefs expressed in this poem?

Plenary – summing up
❖ Students sum up the story and ideas of stanzas 1-5 in no more than two sentences.
- Consider: Is this an optimistic or a pessimistic poem?
- Why?
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Resources


Resource B

Intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood
By William Wordsworth

Genesis 2:8-9

And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.  9 And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
    To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;
    --
Turn wheresoe’er I may,
    By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

    The Rainbow comes and goes
And lovely is the Rose,
    The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
    Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
    The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where’er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

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--But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Genesis 2:16-17 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: 17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.'

Genesis 3: 6-7 6 And when the woman saw that the tree was good ... she ... did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her ... . 7 And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; ...

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 51 Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye ...

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:

1 Kings 8:10-11 the cloud filled the house of the LORD ... : for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of the LORD.

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Matthew 18:2-3, 10 2 And Jesus ... said, '... Except ye ... become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. ...10 Despise not one of these little ones; for ... in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father..'
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Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

Genesis 3: 9, 11, 17, 23
9And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said ... 11
‘Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I
commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?’ ... 17And unto Adam he said,
‘Because thou ... hast eaten of the tree ...: cursed is the ground for thy sake;
in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life’ ...

23Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the
ground from whence he was taken.