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What Helps Wordsworth’s Heart Leap Up

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die!

The Child is father of the Man;

And I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.

William Wordsworth’s poem “My Heart Leaps Up,” also known as “The Rainbow,” is a short poem with a simple message: taking time to enjoy the beauties of nature—as epitomized by a rainbow—is a practice that the speaker values very highly. The simplicity of this message is matched by the simplicity of the format of the poem and the language it employs. At the same time, though, the poem maintains a sense of sophistication because Wordsworth utilizes two important literary techniques: figurative language and rhyming couplets.

Indeed, the use of figurative language is particularly appropriate for the poem because of the speaker’s stated sense of fascination in response to nature. Thus, the opening line employs a subtle departure from reality to describe the speaker’s emotion. By suggesting that the speaker’s heart leaps up, the poet attributes a characteristic to the heart that would normally be associated with a full animal, the ability to jump. In this way, the description can be seen as a form of personification, though, as an organ, the heart isn’t exactly an inanimate object. Nevertheless, its ability to leap represents an unexpected action from what normally remains stationary within the chest. In this way, the description succeeds in clearly suggesting the feeling of elation the speaker experiences in the moment.

Another example of figurative language occurs later in the poem. After explaining that he always has experienced and hopes always to experience the same excitement in nature, the speaker asserts, “The Child is Father of the Man” (7). This metaphor seems paradoxical at first, yet is ultimately also relatively simple. Essentially, Wordsworth is saying, the experiences we have as children will determine the kinds of people we will be as adults. Like a father who produces children, each child can produce an adult, in this case, himself as a man. The circuitous wording in this statement reinforces the point that there is continuity within an individual across all stages of life if that individual is able to recognize it.

The final technique to discuss in the poem is the use of rhyming couplets. In both instances, the rhyming lines are used to evoke the same sense of continuity expressed through the metaphor just discussed. The first couplet reads, “So was it when my life began;/So is it now I am a man” (3-4). The repetition of the same sound in “began” and “man” establishes a close association between these two stages of life. Just as the metaphor suggests, one’s responses to nature in the beginning of life (childhood) and in adulthood can be seen as essentially the same, just as the terminal sounds of the two words are virtually identical. In the second instance, which concludes the poem, the speaker proclaims, “And I could wish my days to be/Bound each to each by natural piety” (8-9). It is this natural piety—his felt devotion to the beauties of the natural world—that he sees as offering a necessary unity to his life, a consistency that will provide meaning to his experiences, he hopes, all the way until the end.

Thus, the end of the poem itself occupies the same terminal position as the end of his life. In the end, therefore, the poem continues to reinforce the message it has presented throughout. By employing figurative language and rhyming couplets in the poem, then, Wordsworth more firmly establishes his argument that love of nature is one of the most life-affirming experiences one can hope to have.