

# My Heart Leaps Up



## POEM TEXT

- 1 My heart leaps up when I behold
- 2 A rainbow in the sky:
- 3 So was it when my life began;
- 4 So is it now I am a man;
- 5 So be it when I shall grow old,
- 6 Or let me die!
- 7 The Child is father of the Man;
- 8 And I could wish my days to be
- 9 Bound each to each by natural piety.



## SUMMARY

My heart skips a beat whenever I see a rainbow in the sky. This has happened to me for as long as I can remember—it happened when I was a child and it still happens to me now as an adult. If I no longer feel the same joy upon seeing a rainbow when I am an old man, I'd rather not live anymore. Childhood teaches people the simple lessons they should carry with them for the rest of their lives. I want to feel a childlike sense of wonder upon seeing the natural world every day of my life.



## THEMES



### THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDHOOD WONDER

"My Heart Leaps Up" describes the pure delight the speaker feels upon seeing a rainbow. This joy prompts the speaker to reflect on the passing of time and the significance of childhood. It is in childhood, the poem argues, that people first feel a sense of powerful awe and wonder at the natural world around them. In turn, adults should strive to maintain the pure, enthusiastic reactions to the natural world they felt as children. Such unbridled appreciation for nature, the poem argues, makes life worth living.

The poem begins in the present tense: the speaker says his heart "leaps up" when he sees a rainbow. This reaction to the sight of the rainbow is not a new or unknown feeling, however. Rather, the speaker has had the same reaction to seeing a rainbow for as long as he can remember. The joy the speaker feels is the *same* joy he felt as a child, which the poem marks by switching to the past tense in line 3 ("So **was** it when my life began"). The speaker takes comfort in realizing that he hasn't

lost his childlike sense of pure, unfiltered wonder upon noticing the beauty of nature.

The rainbow thus makes the speaker feel connected not only to nature, but also to his past self. This sense of continuity from childhood to adulthood, in turn, gives the speaker hope for a happy old age. Just as he has felt joy upon seeing a rainbow from childhood through adulthood, he claims that he will continue to feel that same joy in his old age, signified by the switch to the future tense in line 5 ("So **be** it when I shall grow old").

Furthermore, the speaker claims that it is *through* the experience of childhood that he learned to feel the joy he does at the natural world. Turning the idea of parenting on its head, the speaker suggests that childhood teaches people how to appreciate the simple wonders of the natural world. While adults tend to have more knowledge, experience, skills than children, children are closer to nature and do not regulate their reactions to it. If thunder makes a child feel afraid, that child might cry or hide. Similarly, the rare, colorful sight of a rainbow might give a child an unexpected thrill. A child's innocent, almost religious enthusiasm for nature is what the speaker means by "natural piety" in the final line. The speaker does not want to become jaded or immune to the powers of nature over time, but instead hopes to maintain the child-like enthusiasm for the natural world.

The speaker hopes to keep his childlike appreciation of nature so much that, in line 6, he claims he'd rather die without it, suggesting that to lose enthusiasm for the natural world would be to lose what makes life worth living in the first place. The wisdom of childhood is not one that can be learned through years of experience, the poem argues, but is instead the innocence to notice the natural world and let it move you.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-7
- Lines 8-9



### THE BEAUTY AND COMFORT OF NATURE

A rainbow is a rare, fleeting, and often unexpected gift from nature. Seeing one can feel both exhilarating and comforting—exhilarating for its rarity and comforting for its beauty and implication of hope and wonder (in that rainbows appear after storms and signal a return to brighter days). "My Heart Leaps Up" suggests that nature ought to be appreciated for each of these qualities: the spontaneous beauty it can bring into people's lives, as well as its

comforting implication of hope.

It is easy to become jaded with everyday life, moving in and out of the same rooms, walking the same streets, seeing the same people. It is a bit more difficult to get used to something as sudden, beautiful, and momentary as a rainbow. They simply don't show up every day! At the same time, though, rainbows happen over and over again even if one can never know when they will happen to see another.

The speaker of "My Heart Leaps Up" captures this tension between exhilaration and comfort. His heart "leaps up" when he sees a rainbow, as if he is seeing one for the first time. This reaction of joy and shock is not new, however, but the *same* reaction he has always had when seeing a rainbow. The beauty of the rainbow is not just a momentary feeling of delight, but also a familiar, comforting feeling at once again beholding the beauty and hopeful wonder of nature.

"Natural" in the poem's final line not only refers to the natural world in general, but also describes the sort of appreciation the speaker hopes to have for nature. That is, it is a seemingly unrehearsed or effortless appreciation. The speaker's heart leaping up at seeing the rainbow is "natural" in that he doesn't think about it, but merely feels it. It is an effortless, almost instinctual reaction.

At the same time, the speaker wants his appreciation for nature to be something like "piety." Piety is anything *but* spontaneous or instinctual. Rather, "piety" implies serious religious devotion, often marked by repeated and disciplined acts like daily prayer or worship. By wishing for "natural piety," then, speaker wishes to feel an appreciation for nature that is both spontaneous and practiced.

It is in nature, the poem argues, where one can find a sense of both wonder and comfort at the same time. That he still feels the same joy when he sees a rainbow as an adult that he felt as a child reassures the speaker that he is indeed still living and feeling. His life will go on as it has gone before. Nature helps to remind the speaker that despite the many changes life brings, there is something continuous and larger than himself to appreciate.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 8-9



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:*

The first two lines of "My Heart Leaps Up" establish the event

that prompts the rest of the poem: the speaker relates how his heart "leaps up" when he sees a rainbow. Rather than simply say outright that seeing a rainbow makes the speaker feel happy or joyful, he uses [personification](#) to describe his reaction. Hearts, while one of the most essential parts of the human body, do not themselves "leap." By animating his heart, however, the speaker is able to portray the sudden bliss the sight of a rainbow causes him to feel. It also introduces a sense of playfulness and innocence—qualities often associated with childhood—from the very start of the poem.

The heart's leaping also suggests that the speaker's joyful reaction is not planned, but rather is spontaneous, unbridled, and perhaps even inevitable. That is, the speaker *cannot help* but be happy upon seeing a rainbow, because his heart seems to respond of its own accord.

In turn, the inevitability of the speaker's reaction to the rainbow is reinforced by the musicality of the poem's language. These opening lines employ [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) to link the words together. Note how the many long /ee/ sounds, when spoken aloud, stretch the mouth as in a smile, while the plosive /b/ and /p/ sounds add a bouncy rhythm to these lines:

My heart **leaps up** when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:

This repetition of similar sounds gives the poem the impression that the words inevitably belong together, reinforcing the naturalness, or honesty, of the poet's response to the rainbow. The poem also employs [enjambment](#) between these first two lines. The reader easily glides past the first line break into the second line to find out what, in particular, makes the poet's heart leap so.

Additionally, the first line establishes the meter of the poem as [iambic](#) tetrameter. This just means that each line contains four iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed, da DUM, beat pattern:

My heart leaps **up** when I behold

The second foot of the first line might also be scanned as a [spondee](#), or two stressed beats in a row—"leaps up," which emphasizes the joyous bounce of this movement. The meter is broken slightly in the second line, however, as it only has a set of three stressed and unstressed syllables (making it a line of iambic trimeter):

A rainbow in the sky:

This break in the meter evokes the poet's heart skipping a beat.

### LINES 3-6

*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!*

In lines 3-5, the speaker says that this joy is nothing new or unexpected. Instead, he lays out how he has always felt joy at seeing a rainbow, ever since his "life began"—that is, from childhood. He feels the same joy now as an adult, and assumes he will continue to feel it as he gets older.

The three lines feature clear [parallelism](#), following the same logical structure and even beginning with the same formulation: "So" + a form of the verb "to be." Beginning each line with the same word, "so" (a literary device known as [anaphora](#)) lends them some rhetorical oomph. It drives home the point the speaker hopes to make about the consistency of his joy over time.

By changing tense from the past, to the present, to the future ("So was it" / "So is it now" / "So be it when") tense, however, the speaker is able to also capture and the idea of change: the lines are similar in meaning, though they differ ever so slightly. In the same way, the speaker's joy at seeing a rainbow remains consistent despite the passing of time and the changes in his life. The poet's emphasis on consistency is further felt by the stabilization of the [iambic](#) tetrameter throughout lines 3-5 and the clear [end rhyme](#) between lines 3 and 4 ("began" / "man").

Line 6, however, is shorter than lines 3, 4, and 5. It breaks both the pattern of anaphora and of iambic tetrameter, and ends with a forceful exclamation mark. The brevity of the line itself (only three iambs) make it the most emotional line of the poem. To lose the child-like wonder and joy he felt at seeing a rainbow would be to lose the very thing that makes life worth living. The speaker would rather die than find that nature no longer moves him the way it once did.

## LINE 7

*The Child is father of the Man;*

After the emotional outpouring of line 6, line 7 reestablishes a sense of steadiness and order in the poem as the speaker returns to clear [iambic](#) tetrameter. This line also marks a shift in the poem, which moves from the speaker's personal feelings to a more general, philosophical statement about the nature of life.

While the speaker spends the opening part of the poem explaining how seeing a rainbow has filled him with joy for as long as he can remember, line 7 is far more broad, declaring, "The Child is father of the Man." By capitalizing "Child" and "Man," the poet refers no longer to his own personal experience, but to the general experience of all people. He begins to establish the very Romantic (that is, related to the artistic movement Romanticism, not love!) idea that there is wisdom in the innocence and freedom of childhood.

The line plays with [paradox](#), upturning the idea that parents

teach children all they need to know about the world. Here, the speaker declares that it is the *child* who teaches the *adult*. In particular, it is in the more innocent state of childhood that people first experience the wonders of nature. As children, people have not yet learned how they *ought* to act, but merely *react* to the world around them. The distractions of money and strict social rules do not yet affect children, who in the poem express pure love for nature and a sense of wonder upon witnessing the beauty of the world. The poem is implying that as people grow older and get more and more bogged down by grown-up worries, they should take care to remember the lessons of their childhoods. Doing so may help people regain the connection to nature (with all its joy-inspiring rainbows) that they have lost.

## LINES 8-9

*And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

Here the speaker admits that he desires to feel the enthusiasm for nature he once felt as a child every day of his life. The final two lines of the poem form a rhyming [couplet](#), which works to tie the poem together and give it a sense of a closure. The long /e/ [assonance](#) of "be," "each to each," and "piety" adds to this sense of closure. The phrase "each to each" is also an example of the type of [repetition](#) known as [diacope](#), which, in turn, underscores the fluid connection between all the days of the speaker's life and his connection to nature.

The poem begins in the present tense, with the speaker declaring how his "heart leaps up" when he sees a rainbow. By these final lines the speaker, however, has switched to the past modal: "I *could* wish," the speaker says, implying it is not *guaranteed* that he will continue to feel joy and solace in nature; rather, this is something to desire, to wish for. The change in tense from the opening line of the poem to these final lines creates tension between effort and ease, innocence and experience, spontaneity and exertion. It can be difficult for adults to experience the easy joy they felt as children.

In the beginning of the poem, the speaker's reaction to a rainbow is just that—a reaction that he seemingly does not regulate or force. It is easy, second-nature, and spontaneous, something his heart does without his input or guidance—and, as such, feels pure and honest. This easy enthusiasm is the "natural piety" the speaker longs for in line 9. He sees the rainbow, and he feels immediate joy. When the speaker declares how "The Child is the father of the Man" in line 7, however, he suggests that childhood has something to teach adulthood, implying that something is lost or changed as people grow older.

By admitting "I could wish," in line 8, the poet suggests that it is the innocent, easy connection to nature that people risk losing as they become adults. To wish for something is not effortless or spontaneous, but deliberate. The speaker seems to suggest

that the natural world is there to enjoy and find solace in, but only with some trying as we get farther and farther away from childhood.

The final line, line 9, of the poem, breaks the poem's [meter](#) once again. This line includes an extra foot, making it [iambic pentameter](#)—or a line including five unstressed-stressed feet:

Bound each to each by natural piety

The second-to-last foot here—"ural pi"—is also an [anapest](#), meaning it has two unstressed beats followed by a stressed beat. Altogether, the added length of this line helps bring about a sense of closure to the poem. The poem does not feel cut-off, but whole.

This feeling of completeness is also established by rhyming the endings of the final couplet, so "piety"—arguably the most important word in the poem—rings out clearly. That the form and meter of these final lines adds a sense of wholeness, or unity to the poem is especially significant because that is what the speaker claims he wants for his own life. He wants the days of his life to feel "bound" or united by "natural piety," or an innocent, enthusiastic love for nature.

a short poem, the enjambments serve both to dramatize and accentuate certain lines while adding a sense of cohesion to others, expanding phrases over the line breaks to create moments of hesitation while reading the poem.

The first case of enjambment in the poem occurs at the end of line 1, as the sentence continues through the line break: "when I behold / A rainbow in the sky." This enjambment inserts a moment of suspense into the poem by slightly delaying what it is that makes the speaker's heart leap up. By dedicating a whole line to the rainbow, the poet also emphasizes its importance. Just as a rainbow stands out singularly in the sky, the line stands on its own.

As the poem continues, the speaker again arguably employs enjambment between lines 5 and 6. Lines 3 to 5 preceding line 6 share a [parallel](#) structure that rhythmically and syntactically connects them as the speaker expresses how his feeling of joy at seeing a rainbow has persisted (and will continue to persist) throughout his life. Line 6 noticeably breaks the parallel structure but it continues the sentence begun in line 5. There is a comma, and as such a pause, at the end of this line, and some readers may thus experience it as [end-stopped](#). Regardless, its meaning is enriched and fulfilled by the line that follows. The enjambment here helps to vary the rhythm of the poem further emphasizes the drama of line 6, in which the speaker claims to rather die than lose the wonder and joy he feels at seeing a rainbow.

The final clear enjambment of the poem occurs in its closing [couplet](#), where the speaker breaks the sentence in half on the word "bound." This use of enjambment formally enacts the kind of continuation that the speaker wishes for his life: just as the speaker wants the days of his life to be connected or "bound" by his continued love of nature, the final lines of his poem are connected through enjambment. Though they are two distinct lines, they function as one unit of meaning. Similarly, the days of the speaker's life are discreet, singular units of time that are also bound or tied together to make up his life as a whole.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "behold / A"
- **Lines 5-6:** "old, / Or"
- **Lines 8-9:** "be / Bound"

## ANAPHORA

The poet employs [anaphora](#) by beginning lines 3, 4, and 5 with the same word, "So." This clear [repetition](#) sonically ties these lines together and further emphasizes their meaning (which is that the speaker has always and will always feel joy upon seeing nature's beauty).

The repetition of "so" is part of a larger pattern of [parallel](#) structure that lines 3 to 5 all follow: "so" + a form of the verb "to be." The speaker moves from describing his past ("So was



## SYMBOLS



### THE RAINBOW

A rainbow is traditionally a [symbol](#) of hope, and that is how it's being used in this poem. Rainbows are beautiful sights that show up after storms. As such, they signify the passing of a storm—symbolically, of turmoil and suffering—and the start of a calmer, lovelier period. The mention of the rainbow is also perhaps a subtle [allusion](#) to the story of Noah in the Book of Genesis, in which God sends a rainbow as a promise to never again destroy the earth with floods.

The rainbow in "My Heart Leaps Up" fills the speaker with a sense of hope and promise. It reassures him that what gave him joy and wonder as a child still gives him joy, in turn allowing him to feel connected to the natural world and connected to his future.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "rainbow"



## POETIC DEVICES

### ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs sparingly times in "My Heart Leaps Up." As

it"), his present ("So is it") and his future ("So be it"), each time using the same "So" at the beginning of the line to refer back to the feeling of joy that overcomes him when he happens to see a rainbow in the sky. While the initial repetition of "So" works to emphasize how the poet's feeling of joy in childhood continues throughout his life, the changes in tense that follow reflect how that joy persists despite the passing of time.

#### Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "So was it"
- **Line 4:** "So is it now"
- **Line 5:** "So be it"

## ALLUSION

"My Heart Leaps Up" refers to the biblical story of Noah and the great flood in the poem's motivating event: when that the speaker sees a rainbow and feels joy. It does not *explicitly* refer to the bible or Noah's story, but is instead a likely [allusion](#).

In the Book of Genesis, Noah builds an ark to save his family and the animals of the world from the massive flood sent by God. When the flood is over and Noah and his family survive, God sends a rainbow as a promise to never again destroy the earth with floods. Thus while the rainbow is meaningful to the poem's speaker because it assures him that he continues to be connected to nature as he grows old, the rainbow is also meaningful as a broader [symbol](#) of peace and hope in the Western tradition.

#### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "A rainbow"

## PERSONIFICATION

In "My Heart Leaps Up" the speaker [personifies](#) his own heart by granting it the human ability to leap. His heart is not *literally* leaping, of course; instead, this language relates the sudden, child-like glee the speaker feels when he sees a rainbow. It feels as though his heart [metaphorically](#) skips a beat in its excitement and joy. It is a giddy, happy moment.

Additionally, by personifying his heart, the speaker de-emphasizes his own agency. That is, personification underscores that the speaker is not necessarily *trying* to feel such joy when he sees the rainbow. He is not *forcing* or *pushing* himself to feel anything. Rather than being something premeditated, his reaction to the beauty of the rainbow is instinctual; his heart reacts of its own accord, without the speaker's deliberate input. Personification reveals that he cannot help but feel the joy he does when he sees a rainbow.

#### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My heart leaps up"

## PARADOX

"My Heart Leaps Up" employs [paradox](#) in line 7, when the speaker declares: "The Child is father of the Man." At first this In this line seems to make no sense; how can a child be the parent of an adult?

Here the speaker is turning the idea of parenting on its head. Whereas fathers usually teach their children the wisdom that they (those fathers) have gained from years of experience, the speaker claims that *children* actually have something to teach *adults*. In other words, those dads could learn a thing or two from their kids (as could moms—Wordsworth uses "Man" as a stand-in for all people, as was typical of his day, but this lesson is applicable to women as well!).

More specifically, the poem argues that it is in childhood that people learn to feel the love and appreciation for nature that they will carry with them into adulthood. The wisdom of childhood—manifested in the speaker's innocent, enthusiastic reaction to nature—is not one that needs to be practiced or learned over years of experience. Rather, it is an instinctual response, one that people would do well to remember as they grow older and shed their childhood innocence.

#### Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "The Child is father of the Man"

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) occurs in several lines throughout "My heart leaps up," working to give the poem a pleasing, melodic sound and helping to give the poem a feeling of connectedness and completion.

Assonance is most prominent in the opening line of the poem, where the repetition of the long /e/ sound in "leaps" and "behold" binds the words together and leads the reader easily from one word to the next. The long /ee/ sound when said aloud also opens the mouth like a smile might. The long /o/ of "behold" and "rainbow," meanwhile, suggests the awe and wonder the speaker feels.

Through the rest of the poem assonance continues to add a subtle sense of easy musicality, helping the poem flow forward pleasantly. Note the assonant vowel sounds that mark the ends of lines 3-5, all of which also feature [parallelism](#). There's the long /i/ of "my life," the /a/ of "began," "am," and "man"; and a return to the long /o/ with "grow old." This assonant spell is then broken by line 6 as the speaker declares he would rather die than lose his sense of childlike wonder and joy. The contrast between the gentle assonance and parallelism of lines 3-5 and the abruptness of line 6 makes line 6 feel all the more jarring

and unpleasant—an outcome the speaker definitely does not want.

The final two lines employ assonance of the long /e/ sound as well, which appears in "be," "each to each," and "piety." This creates a sensation of closure that helps to wrap up the poem.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "leaps," "behold"
- **Line 2:** "rainbow"
- **Line 3:** "my life," "began"
- **Line 4:** "am," "man"
- **Line 5:** "grow old"
- **Line 8:** "be"
- **Line 9:** "each," "each," "piety"

## CONSONANCE

The poem uses a fair amount of [consonance](#) to create a pleasant musicality and a sense of unity throughout the poem. In the first two lines, consonance of the plosive /p/ and /b/ sounds adds a bouncy rhythm to the speaker's words, which, in turn, reflects the leaping action of his heart:

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow ...

The next three lines feature a mix of consonance, [assonance](#), [anaphora](#), and [parallelism](#) that, altogether, make them feel intensely unified and connected. This makes sense, given that these lines describe the joy the speaker has always felt and hopes to always feel whenever he looks upon the beauty and wonder of the natural world. Note how /w/, /n/, /m/, and /l/ sounds weave throughout this section:

So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,

Finally, the poem's closing couplet again uses consonance to add a sense of connection, unity, and closure to the poem, as the /d/, /b/, and /ch/ sounds reverberate throughout lines 8 and 9.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "heart leaps up," "behold"
- **Line 2:** "rainbow"
- **Line 3:** "was," "when," "my," "life," "began"
- **Line 4:** "now," "am," "man"
- **Line 5:** "when," "shall," "old"
- **Line 6:** "let," "die"
- **Line 7:** "Child"
- **Line 8:** "could," "days," "be"

- **Line 9:** "Bound," "each," "each," "natural"



## VOCABULARY

**Behold** (Line 1) - A somewhat archaic word meaning to see or observe something. In the poem, the speaker beholds, or sees, a rainbow. The word has religious overtones as well. Something is "beheld" if it is truly wonderful, awesome, or significant.

**bound** (Line 9) - The word bound has multiple meanings, several of which are at work in "My Heart Leaps Up." For one, it means tied together, fastened, or united. In this sense the speaker wishes the days of his life to be united by a consistent love for nature. This is the most literal definition of the word in the context of the poem. The verb "to bound" also means to leap or stride forward or upward. That Wordsworth chose to use "bound" to describe the way he wants the days of his life to continue recalls the "leap" of the speaker's heart in the opening line. The childlike enthusiasm for nature—marked by the heart fluttering or leaping—is what the speaker hopes his days feel connected by. Finally, when used as an adjective, "bound" refers to a destiny or a direction towards a specific place. In a poem concerned with the passing of time and aging, to use "bound" also suggests that the speaker desires his destiny to be an appreciation and love for nature.

**Piety** (Line 9) - Religious, reverent, or dutiful. In the poem, the speaker describes his heart leaping up as an example of piety. His reaction to a gift of nature such as a rainbow is enthusiastic, and pure. It is also a reaction to something far greater and more mysterious than himself.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"My Heart Leaps Up" does not follow any particular poetic form, though it can be broken down into two sections. In the first two lines, the speaker relates how seeing a rainbow makes him feel joyful. The colon at the end of line 2 indicates that what follows will relate to the joy the speaker feels when he sees a rainbow.

Indeed, he goes on, in lines 3 to 6, to relate how he has felt this joy since his childhood, throughout his adulthood and how he will likely continue to feel it as he ages. This first "section" ends with the briefest line, line 6, of the poem, "Or let me die!" Line 6 is the most personal and emotional of all the lines, marked by its brevity and exclamation point. The line stands out to the reader, and logically divides the poem in two.

The final three lines of the poem stand apart, though they are included in the same stanza as the rest of the poem. The use of a semi-colon at the end of line 7 connects the generalized,

philosophical statement "The Child is father of the Man" with the more personal closing couplet of the poem. The speaker fits his own experience into the philosophical schema he established and, in turn, might be encouraging the reader to do so as well.

## METER

"My Heart Leaps Up" mostly follows [iambic](#) tetrameter. This means its lines are made up of four iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern. Take in the poem's opening line:

My heart leaps up when I behold

It's possible to scan the second foot here as a [spondee](#) ("leaps up"), which adds emphasis to the heart's action but doesn't disrupt the overall flow of the poem.

That said, while the majority of the lines follow this [meter](#), the poem does not perfectly abide by iambic tetrameter. There are a few deliberate exceptions that work to emphasize certain lines and deepen their impact. Lines 2, 6, and 9 each break meter slightly. The poet still uses iambs, but line 2 only uses three of them, making it iambic trimeter:

A rainbow in the sky

The change in meter here works to set the rainbow aside from the surrounding lines, giving the reader a chance to breathe on either side of the line before moving on with the rest of the poem. It is almost as if the reader is given a chance to stop and gaze up at the rainbow in the sky. The line also suggests the act of the speaker's heart effectively skipping a beat.

Line 6 also has fewer than four sets of iambs, making it iambic diameter:

Or let me die!

This line follows the enjambment at the end of line 5 and breaks the [parallel](#) structure of the preceding three lines (lines 3-5), all of which share the same iambic tetrameter as the opening line of the poem. By breaking meter, the line stands out and feels abrupt. The reader senses the speaker's emotion in wishing to die rather than lose his childlike wonder for nature. The reader almost wants to hear more syllables but is denied them, just as death would deny the speaker any more life.

The final line, by contrast, includes one extra iamb, making it iambic pentameter (a set of 5 iambs). This terminal expansion adds closure, rounding out the syllables lacking in line 6 and suggesting that the "natural piety" the speaker desires for himself is a gift that keeps on giving.

## RHYME SCHEME

"My Heart Leaps Up" uses rhyme throughout to help organize and unify its lines. The [rhyme scheme](#) of the poem is:

ABCCABCDD

Looking at the pattern of these [end rhymes](#), the final couplet stands out on its own as the only lines in the poem that share the rhyming /ee/ sound: "be" and "piety." No other lines end with this rhyme, and yet the /ee/ sound is not new to the poem. The first line reverberates with the same sound through [assonance](#) with the words "leaps" and "behold." Just as the poet wishes his days to feel connected from childhood into adulthood, so the poem enacts a kind of connection between the first line and the last, helping to reinforce that connections are possible and beneficial.

The two shortest lines of the poems (lines 2 and 4) also share the same end rhyme with "sky" and "die." Both lines stand out to the reader because of their brevity, and both are emotional—perhaps the most emotional of the entire poem. Their shared rhyme further connects them. Without the feeling of joy brought on by the rainbow (the "sky"), the speaker would rather die. He cannot have one without the other. To lose the joy of seeing the rainbow would be to die or lose life itself.

Another meaningful end rhyme occurs between lines 3, 4, and 7, which all end in the /an/ sound. In a poem concerned with the connection sustained between childhood and adulthood, it is significant that the word "began" and "man" rhyme poignantly at the end of these lines. The poet seems to be building in a kind of insurance (or self-assurance) that the enthusiasm for nature he felt at the beginning of his life will continue on into manhood.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "My Heart Leaps Up" is anonymous, but describes himself as an adult man, just like Wordsworth was at the time of composing the poem in 1802 when he was in his early thirties. Though it is not stated explicitly, it is safe to presume the speaker of the poem articulates Wordsworth's own feelings.

The speaker speaks candidly in the first-person throughout most of the poem, and the use of the first-person pronoun emphasizes the personal nature of the speaker's thoughts. What he describes is particular to his own experience, but, at the same time, is in no way unusual. Almost everyone manages to see a rainbow in his or her lifetime, and the speaker's experience is one he knows will be understood by many. This is marked by the poet's brief switch from the first-person to more generalized nouns ("Child" and "Man") in line 7.



## SETTING

While the poem itself does not have any particular setting, it was likely prompted by one of the many long walks Wordsworth took with his sister Dorothy through the Lake District region of northern England. Dorothy's well-kept journal of their daily life while living there reveals that Wordsworth wrote the poem on March 26, 1802. She writes: "While I was getting into bed, he wrote *The Rainbow*." Whether the two had seen a rainbow or not that day, she does not record. Earlier in her journals, however, she does make mention of rainbows her and William saw together.

Mostly, the poem is set in the poet's own mind, where he thinks on his life from childhood, to the present, and onwards into the future.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

As a Romantic poet, William Wordsworth was part of a group of writers who pushed back against the Enlightenment ideals related to science and strict rationality that had become common by the end of the 18th century. This group of writers most famously included Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Shelley, and William Blake. The Romantic poets sought out a kind of poetry that used "the real language of men," as Wordsworth put it in his [Preface to the Lyrical Ballads](#). Wordsworth felt that poetry should elevate and reflect upon everyday life and experience. For these poets, one of the most poem-worthy subjects was a person's connection to nature.

In addition to their radical ideas about human beings' connection to the natural world, the Romantics also explored a curiosity with childhood in their poetry. Ideas about childhood had been changing from the middle of the 18th century, when people began to reject more Puritan, religious beliefs that children are born sinful, cruel, and corrupted. While earlier books for children focused on forming (or, perhaps more accurately, reforming or molding) children's character in order to save them from sin and teach them moral behavior, later writers and thinkers started to reject the notion that children were inherently sinful. Rather, childhood began to be seen as an innocent state that was only corrupted later by experience and the ills of society. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in particular, helped to shape Romantic-era ideas about childhood when *On Education* was published in 1762.

Wordsworth returns to ideas about childhood in other, more complicated poems, where he suggests that all life is merely a repetition of what people learn first in childhood, even if they didn't realize it at the time. In his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, he

writes: "our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings."

Within his own work, Wordsworth used the final three lines of "My Heart Leaps Up" as an epigram to his longer and more complex poem, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." Like "My Heart Leaps Up," the "Ode" similarly muses on the innocent, pure connection to nature and beauty that the poet felt as a child. Rather than despair that something of his child-like innocence is lost, Wordsworth again takes solace in the memory of childhood and uses the remembrance of his past enthusiasm to encourage him to find beauty in the world as a grown man.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"My Heart Leaps Up" was published in 1807, during Europe's first Industrial Revolution. New manufacturing processes—including increased mechanization of work and the use of steam power—led to vast economic and social changes. The rise of factories led to larger urban populations, and with increasingly overcrowded cities came widespread housing, health, and sanitation issues.

As a Romantic poet, Wordsworth often turned to nature to find solace from the ever-industrialized, modern world he saw bustling around him. As industrialization began to change the landscape of northern England with the addition of factories and railroads, Wordsworth grew increasingly worried that people were moving farther and farther away from nature. His writing fits in with that of other Romantic poets who turned their noses up at increasingly urban modern life.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth](#) — Dorothy kept a detailed diary of the days she spent living with her brother William in Dove cottage. Some entries reveal the context and inspiration for many of the poems in Wordsworth's 1807 collection. (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/42856>)
- [Preface to the Lyrical Ballads](#) — Read Wordsworth's famous essay in which he defends and clarifies his ideas about poetry and articulates some ideals of the Romantic movement. (<https://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/Spring2001/040/preface1802.html>)
- [Preface to the Lyrical Ballads Analysis](#) — Get LitChart's analysis of Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, so you can fully understand it. (<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/preface-to-the-lyrical-ballads/summary-and-analysis>)
- [Childhood and Romanticism](#) — Article from the British

Library expanding upon Romantic ideas about childhood.  
(<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/perceptions-of-childhood>)

- [The Poem Out Loud](#) – Listen to a recording of "My Heart Leaps Up." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrJ0hoqKjcQ>)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- [Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802](#)
- [I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud](#)
- [London, 1802](#)
- [She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways](#)
- [The Solitary Reaper](#)
- [The World Is Too Much With Us](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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