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A STUDY OF WORDSWORTH'S
SONNETS UPON THE PUNISHMENT OF DEATH

by

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I. Introduction

Capital punishment had been a common practice in England since Anglo-Saxon times, and was generally regarded as necessary, if society were to survive. But in 1764 Cesare Beccaria published Essays on Crimes and Punishments which proposed abolition of capital punishment, and which began a crusade for bringing about the end of this most severe retribution. This movement was carried on by liberal politicians such as Jeremy Bentham, Sir Samuel Romilly, John Bright, and William Ewart.¹ In 1837 Parliament passed a bill which removed the punishment of death from about two hundred offences, leaving it applicable only to treason, murder, and a number of lesser cruel and violent crimes. Soon after this law was enacted, Fitzroy Kelly introduced a subsequent bill which would have abolished capital punishment from all crimes except treason and murder.² The bill was quite popular and "obtained no inconsiderable support in the House, and at one time even a majority, but was ultimately defeated by Robert Peel."³ Despite this political defeat the crusade went on, and in 1840, seventy-six years after Beccaria's influential essay, the first resolution for the total abolition of capital punishment was brought before Parliament; and, although the resolution was not passed, ninety members voted in its favor.⁴

It was in this same year, 1840, and in this same political climate that William Wordsworth was writing his Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death. According to Mary Moorman, the poems "had been written chiefly in the early summer of 1840. . . ."⁵ It seems, however, that a good number of them were written before that summer of 1840; in a letter dated 27 January

1840, Wordsworth wrote Edward Moxon that "The Sonnets upon Capital Punishment which I sent you, then no more I believe than 4, are now 11."⁶ In February of 1841 the sequence contained thirteen sonnets, and at that time Wordsworth considered having them printed in a newspaper; he decided not to, however, since gross printing errors plagued earlier publications of his poems in newspapers.⁷ But in December of 1841 Wordsworth allowed Henry Taylor to print the sonnet sequence, along with Taylor's comments, in the *Quarterly Review* of that month.⁸ This appears to be the first actual publication of the Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death.

Wordsworth's fourteen-poem sequence, completed in 1841, presents an argument against proponents of abolition. By examining both social and moral aspects of the issue, he builds a case for the preservation of capital punishment. The sonnet sequence begins by presenting social arguments for capital punishment: the first poem, for example, states that even the sight of the prison is a threat--and therefore a deterrent--to those who would take another man's life. The second poem maintains that compassion and pity must be felt for the victim and his family, rather than for the murderer. The third sonnet suggests that duty to society must overrule the parental compassion that often prevents retribution for capital crimes. And the fourth, fifth, and sixth sonnets explain what will result if capital punishment is abolished: the general mind of society will be debased, the humblest functions of state will suffer, and ancient beliefs will no longer hold the power of prevention if the murderer does not pay with his life.

In the seventh sonnet Wordsworth introduces the religious aspect of his argument, saying that if Christ's mandates are stretched to the point of forgiving all crimes, social order cannot exist. Wordsworth goes on to

argue against the belief that punishment lies beyond the power of the state: in the eighth sonnet he maintains that crime will flourish in the land if the main deterrent is removed; in the ninth and tenth he argues that the state must fortify the moral sense of all and that, through the state, God punishes those who would lower this moral sense. The eleventh and twelfth sonnets imply that other punishments are less desirable than is death: transportation allows the murderer to commit greater crimes, and life imprisonment allows an otherwise penitent criminal to reject his faith when faced with old temptations. In the concluding sonnet Wordsworth states that the Christian faith does not condemn capital punishment, but rather deems it necessary; and he hopes that the punishment of death becomes obsolete through lack of use rather than through unwise legislation.

Wordsworth's argument is intended to defend fit retribution for capital offences. Society will benefit and morals will be upheld only if capital punishment remains an integral part of English law--this is Wordsworth's argument. It is important to note, however, that Wordsworth's artistic abilities complement the arguments he uses throughout the work.

Criticism of the sonnet sequence has dealt almost exclusively with Wordsworth's political and religious arguments in the work. Henry Taylor, the first critic to comment on these sonnets, provides valuable insights regarding the political situation in England at the time Wordsworth is writing. Taylor explains and even defends Wordsworth's arguments, and goes so far as to attack the arguments of those who are working for abolition. Taylor does allude to the poet's art itself, but it is in a rather general statement: he states that Wordsworth is accustomed "to consider the sentiments and judgments which he utters in poetry with as deep a solicitude as

to their justness as if they were delivered from the bench or the pulpit."⁹ F. M. Todd's observations about the work are political as well. He says of Wordsworth: "There is no evidence that he opposed the abolition of the death sentence for any crimes but those that are still capital offences to-day. His poems on the subject disclose a consistent humanitarianism, a desire to temper the violence of existing punishments as far as possible."¹⁰ And Edith C. Batho discusses Wordsworth's political and moral arguments, but does not deal with the poetry itself.¹¹

The criticism that does deal with Wordsworth's art is somewhat brief and usually rather negative. Mary Moorman, for example, feels that the same arguments that Wordsworth presents could have been made--and just as effectively--in a prose piece.¹² And Lee M. Johnson states that: "When only one occasion is spread out among the fourteen Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death, Wordsworth is compelled to manufacture uninspiring parallels, illustrations, and variations on it. Here, as in many sonnets on religious history, he falls back on the diction of others."¹³

Whether or not this criticism is either fair or valid will not be an issue in this report; the purpose of this report is not to defend the sonnet sequence. Instead, it will attempt to show that, although the argument of the sonnet sequence is made up of and contained in fourteen separate poems, it is a series of sonnets that forms an aesthetic, unified whole.

II. Unity in Wordsworth's Purpose

The brief overview of Wordsworth's argument given above suggests that the poet has a definite purpose in mind; and by examining each sonnet,

it becomes clear that this purpose is consistently maintained throughout the sonnet sequence. Thus consistency in purpose--to provide evidence that capital punishment is necessary and justifiable for both social and religious reasons--helps provide unity in the sonnet sequence.

The first sonnet introduces the reader to Wordsworth's purpose by suggesting that even the view of a prison may serve as a deterrent to crime. The scene is set on the road to Lancaster Castle; the narrator has stopped to look at the building that stands upon the hill in front of him. The spot on which he stands offers a beautiful view of sea and land, and the towers of the castle seem to grow vertically out of the land. This scene should quiet a troubled heart and should fill the onlooker with thankfulness to God for His gifts. But as the narrator explains, this spot bears the name of "Weeping Hill"; thousands of criminals make their way to the prison, destined for years of confinement or for quick execution, and it is from this very spot that each has a first glimpse of his impending doom. The tears that are shed at such a frightening sight give this spot such a sorrowful name. Thus, Wordsworth implies that if the mere sight of a prison, which is merely a symbol of punishment, can drive a criminal to tears, then the actual punishment itself must hold a much greater power over those who are threatened with it.

Wordsworth views capital punishment as justifiable because it is an effective deterrent to crime; and in the second sonnet, he states that only through capital punishment will all people be provided with the safety that society should be able to provide them. In the first lines of the sonnet Wordsworth admits that our natural impulse is to feel compassion for "worst offenders"; and although we experience anger at the murderer's act, upon

consideration we often feel sorry for these men who yield to temptation and take other men's lives. But Wordsworth asks his audience to avoid such compassionate thoughts if, as often happens, they prevent a just punishment for the deed. The judgments which initiate punishment are made not out of sympathy for the murderer, but out of sympathy for the victim who died blameless, for his family, and for all those who might suffer the same cruelties if the law were not enforced. The implication here is that, if safety is granted the murderer, those who really deserve safety will not have it.

The third sonnet employs the idea of duty to help justify capital punishment. In this sonnet Wordsworth uses the example of a Roman Consul--who sentenced his sons to die for treason--to express the need for a strong sense of moral obligation in punishing the criminal. The decision of the Roman Consul was received with "praise and admiration," and he did not rebuke himself with shallow humanitarian arguments against his actions, but rather defended himself by probing into the ideals on which he based his decision. Thus, duty--his moral and social obligations to the people who depended on him--ruled over his parental feelings. Duty convinced him that what he did was right. Wordsworth goes on to say that some murderers are their own judges, and "pass sentence on themselves." After isolating themselves from society by their grievous crime, they face retribution with "soul unshaken" and demand that death be their punishment. No doubt they feel, as does the Roman Consul mentioned earlier, a deep moral obligation to do what they ought to do. And in this sonnet Wordsworth is suggesting that, if a father will sentence his own sons to die, and if a murderer will demand that he suffer death for his crime, then such a sense of duty should prevail in every court throughout England.

In the fourth, fifth, and sixth sonnets Wordsworth deals directly with the movement toward the abolition of capital punishment; by examining the detrimental effects of this movement, Wordsworth again shows the need for capital punishment. The fourth sonnet, for instance, raises the question of whether death is the one thing to be most dreaded; that is, when evil has overcome good and when a man dares to kill his fellow man, is death the worst to be feared? Wordsworth does not think so. He believes that the lawgiver who spares the murderer is to be most feared, since such actions lower the moral sense of every person in society. Not only do lesser sanctions against crime suffer through this loss of moral sense, but honor also becomes a thing of the past. Wordsworth maintains that honor involves a strict sense of right and wrong, and it cannot tolerate "the weak love of life" to oppose even its lowest mandate, without its degenerating into something less than true honor.

The fifth sonnet, like the fourth, argues that the abolition of capital punishment would be unwise; Wordsworth continues the line of argument by stating that a wise legislator does not confine his view to the issue at hand, but looks beyond the obvious aspects of an individual case and examines carefully the far-reaching implications of any judgment made. The legislator copies God by combining love and fear in his judgment, since both are necessary to maintain power over crime; he shows kindness, in a more universal sense, by upholding the punishment of death. This legislator is not misled by abolitionists' pretense of humanity, since he understands just how much even the most insignificant functions of state would suffer should abolition come about. And he realizes that if capital punishment no longer exists, then neither will England's sovereign power and dignity.

The sixth sonnet concludes the examination of problems that would result from the abolition of the death penalty. Wordsworth begins by addressing the ghosts of conscience which haunt the mind of a murderer, saying that they resemble guardian angels who protect the innocent. Wordsworth hopes that the law will never impair the power of these ghosts to punish and therefore prevent crime. And he goes on to ask how beliefs--which insist that murder is wrong--can continue to prevent crime as they have in the past, if the murderer no longer pays for his crime with his life. For Wordsworth, the answer is obvious: when murderers live and innocents die, there will no longer be anything to believe in.

The seventh sonnet begins Wordsworth's religious argument against the abolition of capital punishment; his purpose here again is to provide evidence that the punishment of death is necessary and justifiable. In this seventh sonnet he suggests that, although man is taught by Christ to forgive his fellow man, if every crime is forgiven by the state, social order simply cannot exist. Wordsworth begins his argument by stating that, when the world was young and when there was little government to discipline men, the ancient law of "an eye for an eye" was conceived; it was a basic and necessary law, serving the purpose it had to. Christ then tempered this ancient law into His laws of patience, suffering, and love; this spirit of the law can be achieved only "through peace" by man. But Wordsworth feels that legislators are wrong to completely lose the need for revenge because, if Christ's mandates are taken to the extreme, the state can no longer punish even minor offenders; in such a situation, ordered and safe society would become "a mere dream." Wordsworth does not imply in this sonnet that Christ's mandates are wrong; instead, he implies that society cannot function if it forever "turns the other cheek."

In the eighth, ninth, and tenth sonnets, Wordsworth refutes the argument that punishment lies beyond the power of the state. The eighth sonnet, for instance, states that if the main deterrent is banned, crime will flourish in the land. The state threatens criminals with "well-measured" punishments for their crimes, but if the punishment for murder is the same as that for lesser crimes, logically the criminal is likely to murder such witnesses as could lead to his arrest. The result would be that "pursuit and evidence" would fail, and the offender would escape altogether; when this happens men will wish again for the old order and the "wild justice of revenge."

Similarly, the ninth sonnet suggests that only by preserving capital punishment is society's "moral sense" upheld. Wordsworth states that, although punishment of any kind is meant to warn and deter, there is a greater aim of punishment that is even more important. The judgments of a state are based upon the "statutes of eternity," and therefore when the state decides and acts upon a certain punishment, it is making concrete the abstract theological laws of eternity. The result of such action is that individual wills no longer struggle, the "groveling mind" is lifted up, wrongdoers are called back to the paths of right, and the morality of all people in the society is protected and upheld. And Wordsworth believes that only through penalty are these results realized.

In the tenth sonnet Wordsworth goes on to refute the argument that even if the above results are realized, man does not have the right to execute another man. Some people believe, Wordsworth says, that life is so sacred and divine that no law, state, or judicial body can rightfully send a man to his grave, where tears and prayers hold no power of communication

with God. These people feel that life should not be taken even for the "foulest crime." But Wordsworth maintains that we, as mortal men, cannot measure "infinite power, perfect intelligence." The implication here is that God has a hand in all that man does, and therefore religious arguments against capital punishment are of little value when viewed in the light that God's infinite power allows him to punish through acts of man.

The eleventh and twelfth sonnets argue that alternative punishments are less desirable than is death. In the eleventh poem Wordsworth says that a man locked in a dungeon for life destroys himself mentally, and even loses any hope that he might have had. And transportation to a foreign land allows the murderer to commit even worse crimes there. Thus, "Mercy" condones capital punishment, in that it leaves the final decision in God's hands; since God never judges wrong, He will send a "contrite soul" to heaven and will in this way assure that loss of hope and further crimes never happen. The same basic concern for the criminal is seen in the twelfth sonnet as well. The condemned man in his cell is assaulted with guilt, his pride is finally subdued, and he may become a penitent whose soul is saved. In this case death is welcome, and he knows salvation when the time comes for his execution. If the state were not to uphold the punishment prescribed, however, the penitent may lose his faith when old temptations return. The state, therefore, acts to preserve--not to destroy--the spiritual faith of even the criminal who is sentenced to death.

Wordsworth concludes his argument in the thirteenth sonnet by stating that although the judge and listeners shudder at the doom set down upon the murderer, they know the source of this judgment is wisdom, and the sacrifice of the murderer's life is not contrary to the beliefs of the Christian Faith.

And Wordsworth feels that the future is promising: man is allowing his fellow man more "social rights" through the stringent punishment of death, and religion is increasing its "preventive care." According to Wordsworth, we should not abolish capital punishment simply because it may have been abused in the past, but should rather hope that this most severe retribution will disappear because there is no longer need for it. Wordsworth prays that soon a time will come when the punishment of death is a thing of the past.

Wordsworth's argument in the sonnet sequence includes both social and religious aspects of the issue of capital punishment, and although both aspects are important to his point, he maintains a single purpose in each. The sonnets resemble each other in that each attempts to justify the use of capital punishment as a form of retribution for murder. The thematic structure of the sequence involves a movement from social justifications to religious ones. Wordsworth's social argument includes secular reasons that the death penalty is needed, while his theological argument explains how man is better off spiritually if he is protected by capital law. But while the poet has divided his argument into two separate sections, his moral purpose is consistent throughout. This consistency of purpose is one way these sonnets are pulled together into a unified whole.

III. Wordsworth's Use of Imagery as a Unifying Device

Wordsworth's use of imagery is another unifying influence in the sonnet sequence, and although each major image does not appear in every sonnet in the sequence, the extent to which each does appear suggests that the poet intends the sequence to be read as a single work. The three major

images that recur are of the fortress, the dungeon, and the road. Fortress imagery is often accompanied by allusions to an upward, ascending motion, consistent with the fact that most fortresses are, in reality, situated on the vantage point of a hill or mountain. Dungeon imagery, on the other hand, usually appears along with images of downward, descending motion; like that of the fortress, the image of motion is related directly to the actual location of the place being alluded to. And the road, depending upon its destination, may lead either upwards or downwards, whether it be upwards towards the castle or down into the land of crime.

Fortress imagery is used by Wordsworth to suggest that capital law is a stronghold against crime and immorality. In the first sonnet, the "towers" of Lancaster Castle suggest a building whose main purpose is defense; in fact, "tower" is often used specifically to describe the whole of a stronghold, of which the tower is the nucleus. The fact that the structures are "grey towers" implies that they are old: yet, their color also suggests an allusion to grey hair turned white with grief, as well as with age; this would be consistent with the reference to the "Weeping Hill" in line eight. The towers of the castle "rise up" not only in a literal sense, but also in the figurative sense of taking up arms against an enemy-- in this case, the enemy is crime. The towers also appear to act as would a "lord," ruling even the air all around, again referring to the idea that here stand figures of great power, which reduce the intensity of an attack by a deadly foe. This fortress is described as a "crown" which is situated-- as are most strongholds--atop a hill; such elevation can be viewed figuratively as a moral, as well as military, superiority over an enemy that attacks from below. Thus, Lancaster Castle, besides being a prison, is

portrayed through imagery as an agent of safety for those who fear the enemy of crime. This same sense of safety and protection characterizes the fortress imagery in the second sonnet. In the phrase "higher source" in line eleven, for example, "higher" connects with the upward or ascending implications of the fortress image, while "source" is at least remotely associated with the implications of authority (crown, lord), which form part of the image. A more direct allusion to the fortress is seen in the fourteenth line of this sonnet: capital punishment provides, just as does a fortress, "firm safety" for those who might otherwise be in personal danger. And the word "firm" suggests a form of protection that is solid, secure, and unyielding to assault or impact; such are the characteristics of nearly any well-built fortress. Thus, the imagery of these two poems is that of a fortress which provides for its occupants--through its location and strength--protection and relative freedom from danger.

The theme of safety, as related to fortress imagery, is seen again in the sixth sonnet. In this case, safety is provided by conscience and beliefs; these "beneficent" protectors are said to "guard the unconscious Innocent," acting as would a fortress to defend innocent occupants from any attack by an enemy. The act of "guarding" is often associated with a tower or stronghold, along whose walls sentries are always posted in case of attack. And the "warnings" mentioned in line eleven might be associated with the shouts and cries of soldiers along the watchtower, in anticipation of an assault upon the fortress. Line eight also contains fortress imagery; here the conscience is said to have the power to "prevent" crime. A fortress too can keep an attack from being successful, thus preventing any injury to those who are inside. The power of the fortress is alluded to

in the "might" of line twelve; the effectiveness of a stronghold lies in the might and strength of its protective walls. (This is much the same idea that is alluded to in the familiar phrase, "a mighty fortress is our God.") But the importance of all this strength and protection lies in the result that is achieved. Wordsworth implies in line fourteen that capital punishment must "survive"; likewise, the fortress must survive in order that its occupants may continue to live in safety and freedom from fear of a deadly enemy.

The fortress imagery in the ninth sonnet once again alludes to an ability to provide safety and protection. In the first two lines, for example, it is stated that the purpose of "penalty" is, like that of a fortress, "to give timely warning and deter." The fortress allows "timely warning," due to its location and structure; its walls provide a deterrent to--and a means of turning back--an enemy that would assault the citizens inside. Likewise, the "State" acts as a fortress, in that the State can "preclude or quell" antagonism or contentions between members of society (O.E.D., preclude, v., #2: "close the door against, shut out"). And in the case of a fortress under seige, the soldiers close the gates to shut out the enemy in the same way the State shuts out any "strife of individual will." One result of this ability to combat the enemy is to "elevate the grovelling mind"; the image may refer to a fortress wherein men do not have to "grovel" in fear. But the most important result of a state's action is its ability to "fortify the moral sense of all." Here is a clear reference to the fortress, wherein man's knowledge of right and wrong--as well as his physical well-being--is protected and preserved by a strength that individual man does not possess alone.

Sonnet fourteen, the "apology," includes a final image that again refers to height or superiority of location. The poet's "utterance finds" an "ampler scope"; this implies, of course, that people are becoming more receptive to his ideas and arguments regarding capital punishment. But "ampler scope" could also be applied to the ability to see further away or to a more profound vision; thus, just as a sentry on the tower of a fortress is able to provide early warning because of his vantage point, the poet can warn the public of the dangers in doing away with capital punishment. A more obvious allusion to the fortress is seen in the fifth line, wherein the poet's imagination is said to "sustain" reason against attacks of irrationality; similarly, a fortress can "sustain" or uphold the safety of its occupants in the event of an attack. Capital punishment is, in effect, a fortress which provides for society a defense against crime; and, in this fourteenth sonnet, the poet acts as does a fortress, in that he protects reason from assaults by irrationality.

Dungeon imagery, like that of the fortress, is a unifying factor in the sonnet sequence. But in contrast with the fortress, the dungeon image suggests the state of being situated in a place of confinement rather than in a place of security.

Dungeon imagery appears in the first sonnet with the mention of Lancaster Castle which, it might be assumed, contains many dungeons itself. In this prison criminals suffer "lingering durance," perhaps implying that they must endure not only captivity but dark, close quarters as well. Likewise, the term "bare" of line twelve could be compared to the "bare" depths of a dungeon, wherein furnishings are few or nonexistent. And the term "cast" in the same line suggests an action of throwing down, as if into a

dungeon; and the "chains" of line fourteen might further restrict the criminal who is in this manner "cast" into his cell.

Sonnet four also contains images of being thrown down and being restricted; furthermore, this sonnet includes images of the cell-keeper and of the mental and physical anguish a criminal might experience in a dungeon. The image of descending into a dungeon, for example, can be seen in line three, wherein the term "blackest" might suggest the underground darkness of a dungeon. Likewise, the term "debase" in line nine suggests a lowering in quality or position, alluding to the fact that prisoners are taken down into the depths of a dungeon. There are also images of the dungeon cell itself and its restraining characteristics: "vague" of line ten, for example, could refer to one's obscure, indistinct perception of the inside of a cell, due to the lack of light. And the "palpable restraints" that are mentioned in line eleven create images not only of the walls and door of a dungeon, but also of the chains and other devices used to punish the most serious offenders. Legislators, by remitting capital punishment, would "unbind" these restraints and would, figuratively, allow the dungeon inmates to go free. Another type of "restraint" used in a dungeon is the guard or cell-keeper, who is alluded to in this fourth sonnet. The "fell mastery" mentioned in the second line might describe the fierce and sometimes cruel dominion that a guard holds over his prisoners. And a guard, like "honour" of line twelve, maintains "absolute rule" over those who are in his charge; neither he nor "honour" can allow those under his authority "to withstand . . . his least command." Indeed, it is this authority invested in a prison guard that contributes to the mental and physical anguish suffered by inmates. It is stated in line six that death

is "dreaded"; yet, forced existence in a subterranean vault under these conditions must be as much a cause of dread as is death. And in the seventh line the death penalty is referred to as "capital pains"; similarly, dungeon existence would no doubt involve many "pains" as well, both of mental anguish and physical torture. The result of these "pains" might well be a loss of mental and physical strength on the part of the prisoner, which is alluded to in the term "weak" of line fourteen.

Images of the dungeon and its effect upon the criminal appear again in the eighth sonnet. The "State's embrace" mentioned in the second line, for example, may be likened to the "embrace" of a prison cell; in each case, that which is embraced experiences a lack of freedom and movement. Another allusion to the dungeon is the image of the road of crime, which involves a movement "downward," as if into a dungeon; and the term "ushering" creates an image of being escorted, which could be applied to a prisoner being ushered to his cell. The "dark abode" found in line eight again suggests the lack of light in a dungeon; without adequate laws, however, this "dark abode" becomes crime's hiding place rather than its prison. And the term "foul" in line ten refers to murder, but it might also refer to the physically loathsome conditions within a dungeon. Passion's "free range" in line thirteen might be contrasted to a prisoner's very limited "range" in a dungeon; the area he may move over is a very small one indeed. And finally, the effects of the dungeon on the criminal is alluded to in line four; the threat of imprisonment is one of the "well-measured terrors" along the road of crime; likewise, the "horror" associated with murder in line ten resembles the "horror" and repugnance felt by a prisoner when cast into a dungeon.

The dungeon is addressed directly in sonnets eleven and twelve. The eleventh sonnet, for example, suggests that a criminal who is "locked in a dungeon" suffers great mental and spiritual anguish, even to the point of losing "every hope that mutual cares provide." Since loss of hope is perhaps the most disintegrating mental torture a human being can experience, it is in the best interest of the murderer that God, "who cannot judge amiss," takes the criminal's life and spares him such unbearable suffering. Thus, in this sonnet there is a direct statement about the psychological effects of the dungeon, whereas this aspect has merely been alluded to in previous imagery. But these psychological effects can also work for good, as is seen in the twelfth sonnet. The criminal becomes a "kneeling penitent" while he is "alone within his cell"; it is within the dungeon that "remorse stings to the quick" and where the sinner becomes a saved man. The important thing to keep in mind is, of course, not to threaten a man with eternal residence in a cell, which causes him to lose hope altogether. Thus, the dungeon can serve as an agent of salvation as well as a stern means of punishment.

The fourteenth sonnet combines dungeon imagery with the fortress imagery already mentioned. The "formal world" of the first line suggests a lack of ease or freedom, as does the "cold chain" of the same line; both of these images could be applied to the dungeon. And the poet states in lines six and seven that his heart "beats/Against all barriers," just as an exasperated prisoner might, out of frustration, throw himself against the walls of his cell. It seems, in Wordsworth's case and in his crusade against abolition, the poet's "barriers" are nearly as formidable as are those of the prisoner in a dungeon.

Road imagery, as it appears in the first, eighth, and fourteenth sonnets especially, also lends unity to the sonnet sequence. Images of the road usually suggest a movement of some sort: in this case the first sonnet suggests a movement upwards towards the prison; in the eighth sonnet the movement is downward into the land of crime; and in the fourteenth sonnet the road has not yet been travelled and therefore may lead either upwards or downwards, depending upon which route is taken.

The road in the first sonnet leads to Lancaster Castle, which, as we have noted, stands upon a hill in the distance. This road moves upwards until it reaches the "bare eminence" of line twelve; it is upon this rise of ground that the poet stops to view the scene around him. And as is so characteristic of Wordsworth's style, time and movement are stopped to allow a close examination of surroundings and of the feelings excited by such surroundings. Thus, the road has led the poet and reader to "this spot" which, upon careful observation, "unfolds" a beautiful panoramic view of the countryside and of the castle in the distance. The poet goes on to say that this view should cause feelings of "joy and gratitude to God" to overwhelm an onlooker; yet, "this spot" along the road is named "Weeping Hill." The name originates, as the poet explains, from the fact that criminals weep as they move along the road "toward" the prison, since it is here that they get a first look at their impending doom. It is "along this way," or along this road, that the abstract idea of punishment is made concrete, in the form of the prison. And the fact that the road leads upwards to the prison suggests a movement towards a goal: Wordsworth sees in punishment the ability to protect society from attacks by crime. The implication of realizing such a goal is that men perhaps may travel this road and enjoy the view without fearing quite so much for their safety.

Road imagery appears again in the eighth sonnet, wherein the ways of crime are likened to a road that moves down into the depths of "wrongful acts." Although "fit retribution" is morally beyond the power of the state, "terrors" such as the death penalty may be placed "in the road" to prevent would-be criminals from travelling down this evil path. This road is "downward and broad," suggesting degradation, debasement, and indecency; and if the "main fear," capital punishment, is "doomed to banishment" crime may find greater safety along this dark road. The imagery here suggests not only a road of evil, but also the personification of crime as a highwayman who, when fleeing from the scene of an evil act, is likely to kill any witnesses present since he no longer has to fear punishment that would take his own life. In this way, the highwayman protects himself and his act from discovery, and exemplifies the case of "bad ushering worse event." Likewise, if there are no longer "terrors" or barriers along this road to hinder the criminal's flight, and if there are no longer witnesses to provide the law with direction, "pursuit and evidence so far must fail." In this case, the road does not lead upwards towards some ideal goal, but rather descends into the evil world of crime. When the law allows murder to hide lesser crimes and when "guilt" escapes, men will see the great need for capital punishment. "Passion" will ask for her "old free range" along the road of crime, where the "wild justice of revenge" may once again provide barriers against those who would travel down and hide along this road to evil.

Road imagery in the fourteenth sonnet is used by Wordsworth to suggest that England is in a state of change with regard to capital punishment and, until the issue is resolved, the journey will be a trying one indeed. Because it is "a painful road" that lies ahead, Wordsworth seeks

"guidance" from God; the suggestion here is that the road is unknown to the travellers and God will serve as guide along its treacherous path. There is also the suggestion, in the reference to "whatsoe'er the way each takes," that the road may divide somewhere ahead; yet, Wordsworth does not condemn those who might take a different "way" than does he, since his hope is that each person will keep in mind a common destination--"the prospect of a brighter day." And if we extend this road imagery to include Wordsworth's personal stake in the journey, it might be said that he is given "ampler scope" or more freedom in order that he may persuade others to take the path he has chosen; this freedom is the "gain" that he is becoming "conscious of" in the third line. In any case, he finds himself struggling "against all barriers" that hinder his progress along the road, "in lofty place or humble life's domain," perhaps suggesting that the road will lead him through religious as well as "humble" social arguments against capital punishment.

Images of the fortress, the dungeon, and the road are compared and contrasted in the sonnet sequence to symbolize Wordsworth's view of punishment and crime. For Wordsworth, the fortress symbolizes the ability of capital law to protect the social and spiritual good of man, the dungeon symbolizes capital punishment's ability to control and subdue the dangers of crime, and the road symbolizes the movement in England to do away with capital law and the subsequent reaction to this movement. The recurrence of this imagery in the work both suggests that Wordsworth maintains a consistent viewpoint throughout and lends unity to the sonnet sequence as a whole.

IV. Unity in Wordsworth's Tone

Tone, or the poet's attitude toward his subject, is one more unifying factor in the sonnet sequence. Tone is controlled mainly through

variations in meter and speed; when the basic meter is replaced by another, or when pauses are omitted to increase speed, the result is an emphatic and sometimes emotional statement of the poet's feelings. By examining the ideas that Wordsworth emphasizes through meter and speed, in four representative sonnets, it is possible to estimate the extent to which the poet is emotionally involved in the poem. This emotional involvement with the subject matter suggests that Wordsworth's feelings about capital punishment are genuine and that the tone of the sonnet sequence is both serious and straightforward. We might assume also that the tone is sincere because, as David Perkins points out, Wordsworth is writing during a period when sincerity is "not an issue--not because it was taken for granted, but because no one was thinking about it."¹⁴

This is not to say that every sonnet is written in the same tone, or that the tone of a single sonnet can be defined simply as serious and sincere. Rather, Wordsworth employs a variety of emotional responses in the sonnet sequence, while maintaining a current of straightforward seriousness and sincerity throughout. Unity is achieved when the poet uses these emotional responses in a way that consistently points out his wholehearted and sincere concern over the issue of capital punishment.

In the first sonnet, for example, Wordsworth has combined emotions of both joy and sorrow in order to express his feelings about the prison at Lancaster; yet, such a contrast of emotions does not mean the poet lacks consistency in point of view. Instead, this outpouring of joyful emotion in the first part of the poem, and the rather heavy, sorrowful lines of the latter section of the poem combine to emphasize Wordsworth's underlying tone of earnest concern over the issues of imprisonment and capital punishment.

Wordsworth varies both meter and speed in this first poem to achieve special emphasis and emotion. It is when departing from the poem's basic iambic rhythm that the poet indicates a special tone or attitude. The first variation on the basic meter occurs in the fifth line, which ends with an amphimacric foot. This shift in meter occurs at a place in the line where Wordsworth has included the interjection "yea"; this combination of metrical change and emphatic term suggests that the poet is working at a high emotional pitch at this point. The idea emphasized is, of course, that which is included in lines six and seven: the beautiful, panoramic view of Lancaster Castle and the surrounding countryside is so awesome that a person viewing such a scene might be filled with "joy and gratitude to God." Indeed, the reader is ultimately taken up in the excitement and joy which the poet describes in these lines. The important point to be noted here is that Wordsworth has set an animated, excited tone in these lines; yet, it is an excitement tempered by a strong belief in God and in creation, suggesting that Wordsworth maintains a contemplative attitude towards even the most breathtaking of situations. Thus, while the first section of sonnet one includes flights of emotion which border upon carefree indulgence in nature, it is clear that Wordsworth never lets this emotion get out of control and that his excitement is directed towards God as much as it is towards nature.

The rather joyful but calm tone of the first part of the poem is contrasted sharply with the heavy, sad tones of the last six lines. It is as if Wordsworth has suddenly transformed himself, mentally, from being an objective observer into one of the criminals on his way to the prison, and his reaction to such an imaginary situation is reflected in the tone of these final lines. By shifting meter once again, the poet emphasizes the

melancholy fact that "thousands" of prisoners have moved towards the prison; the iambic meter is replaced by a trochaic foot at the beginning of the ninth line. A change in meter emphasizes also the fate a criminal may suffer once inside the prison; the third and fourth feet of line eleven are pyrrhic and spondaic, respectively. This metrical change actually mimics the sad prospect of a "quick death with shame," by stressing each of the words "quick" and "death." But the emotional pitch of the sonnet reaches a peak when, in line thirteen, only the third foot remains iambic; the first foot is amphibrachic, and the second, fourth, and fifth feet are trochaic. This line also ends with an unstressed syllable. Such radical change in meter suggests that, once again, Wordsworth is very much emotionally involved with the subject matter; he recognizes the fact that even the sight of a prison can have profound psychological effects on one who is destined to reside in such a place. A final variation from iambic to trochaic meter, at the beginning of line fourteen, emphasizes the fact that the prisoner's "tears," are "shed on their chains." The situation of the crying prisoners is a sad one indeed, and Wordsworth's tone reflects that sadness. These final lines show the poet's understanding of a condemned man's reaction to such a fate. We see, then, that this first sonnet is made up of a contrasting set of emotional responses to a view of Lancaster Castle: for the free man, all is beautiful and awe-inspiring; for the prisoner in chains, the view excites nothing but sadness and grief. Wordsworth has captured the essence of these different feelings, while maintaining a serious, contemplative, and sincere tone throughout the entire sonnet.

Now an increase in the speed with which a line is read--caused by lack of pauses--also makes the line seem more emphatic. It would seem that

phonetic considerations, such as vowel and consonant length or the occurrence of consonants together, would also affect the speed with which a line might be read. It is a linguistic phenomenon of the English language, however, that the speaker or reader of a line of poetry will overlook the difficulty in pronouncing words and phrases, in order to achieve and maintain any set rhythmic pattern. Thus, the occurrence of consonants together, or the theoretical length of vowels and consonants, does not affect the actual speed with which a line of poetry is read. It is easier, for example, for a speaker to pronounce "eye for eye" than "tooth for tooth," because of the number of consonants contained in the latter; yet, both phrases would be read at an identical rate, since the English language tends to maintain a regular rhythm, regardless of the difficulty in pronouncing a group of words or a phrase. We must therefore rely upon the presence or absence of pauses within a line of poetry to determine how quickly or slowly the line can be read; and, by such a determination, the tone of the poem can, indirectly, be identified.

In this first sonnet, Wordsworth has increased speed in lines six and seven, emphasizing again his highly emotional response to the view and his feeling of gratitude to God. Thus, we see that the poet has combined three techniques--metrical change, emphatic terms, and increased speed--to achieve an excited, yet happy, tone of voice. And when, in lines eleven and twelve, the speed is again increased, the emotional pitch of the poem reaches another climax; in this case however, the emotion is one of sadness rather than of happiness. Obviously, increase in speed alone does not necessarily set a sad tone; instead, change of speed merely emphasizes the idea contained in a line, and in this case the idea involves the melancholy

prospect of imprisonment. Here too, a combination of literary techniques is used to stress an important idea: an increase in speed and variation of meter in line eleven combine to point out, perhaps, that "lingering durance or quick death" is really what this poem is all about.

The fact that Wordsworth moves from pleasant to unpleasant emotional responses to the view of Lancaster Castle tends to give more urgency to his message; and ultimately, this urgency suggests that the poet's message is a serious and sincere one, a message that is of great concern and importance to him.

This seriousness of tone is seen throughout the sonnet sequence; if we examine sonnet seven, for instance, we can see that Wordsworth employs much the same technique seen in the first sonnet of combining tones to achieve a more emphatic statement about capital punishment. The first eight lines of the seventh sonnet are written in a somewhat subdued, mild tone, while the last six lines incorporate tones of greater emotion and excitement. The terms used in the first section of the poem--terms such as "weak," "meek," "patience," and "peace"--help set a quiet, subdued tone. Conversely, terms such as "strain," "rash impulse," "vindictive," "inflict," and "pain" contribute to the rather tense, emotional tone of the final six lines. Thus, we see again that Wordsworth has used contrasting tones to express his concern over the movement to abolish capital punishment.

This is not to say, however, that the first section of the poem lacks feeling or emotion. Wordsworth uses metrical change in these lines, as he has done before, to emphasize ideas he feels are especially important. The metaphor of the law being "a light, though but as of daybreak," for example, is intensified by a shift to spondaic and trochaic meter at the end of the

fourth and at the beginning of the fifth lines, respectively. The religious implications of "a light" coming out of darkness are most important to Wordsworth, since he feels that worldly laws are based upon heavenly mandates. Likewise, the shift in line seven to trochaic meter emphasizes Christ's teaching; and just as important is the stress Wordsworth puts on the pronoun "his" in this line, showing clearly that "patience" and "long-suffering" are attributes of Christ. Yet, the metrical changes in this first section of the poem emphasize lines which are more pensive than emotional, and this tends to set a somewhat quiet, thoughtful tone.

In contrast to such a subdued tone is that of the final six lines of the poem. Here, Wordsworth's emotional response to abolitionists' arguments is indeed a strong one. The idea that lawmakers "strain" Christ's laws to the point of breaking is highly objectionable to Wordsworth, and he therefore responds emphatically. In the ninth line, he shifts to a four-foot line, made up of two anapests and two iambs; and in the tenth line, the first foot is amphibrachic and the second foot is trochaic. It is here that Wordsworth begins an emotional, excited tone of voice, and as we have seen, the terms he uses point this out. But the most influential departure from the basic iambic pentameter appears in the last two lines: the fourth foot in line thirteen is anapestic; and in line fourteen the first foot is trochaic, the fourth foot is pyrrhic, and the last foot is a spondee. This metrical variation intensifies the conclusion Wordsworth reaches in the poem: by straining Christ's laws, "social order" will become "a mere dream." The tone here is virtually one of anger and frustration over the problems inherent in the abolitionist cause, and this angry, emotional tone is very different from the rather objective, contemplative tone seen in the first part of the poem.

But the emphasis of key ideas results not only from metrical variation, but from increases in speed as well. The first two lines, for example, contain no internal punctuation, tending to make them read faster and seem more emphatic than do slower lines. Thus, the origin of capital punishment is emphasized; the fact that capital law supplanted a weakness of "discipline" is important to Wordsworth's argument, since he believes that a society cannot survive without such disciplinary measures being taken. The idea that Christ "proscribed the spirit fostered by that rule" is also important to the argument, in that Christ did not reject the rule of an "eye for an eye," but rather "tempered" it; this idea is intensified by an increase in poetic speed, achieved through lack of internal punctuation. And in the ninth line, increased speed is combined with metrical variation to emphasize again the folly of those "who strain/ His mandates." The combination of increased speed and varied metrics also appears in the last two lines, each of which contains no internal punctuation. These final two lines, which point out the dangers of abolition, are perhaps the most emphatic of any in the poem; this emphasis sets both a tone of seriousness about the subject and a tone of warning to those who might "forbid the State to inflict a pain."

Consequently, unity of tone can be seen in this poem, in that the poet deals with his subject seriously and sincerely throughout; he can recognize the need for Christ's mandates, but more importantly, he can see the danger in extending those mandates so far as to threaten the very existence of society. Thus, this sonnet, like the first, incorporates contrasting emotional responses within an overall framework of sincere and serious concern about the issue of capital punishment.

The thirteenth and fourteenth sonnets, which serve as conclusion and apology for the sequence respectively, maintain the serious and sincere tone seen in the previous poems. Each of these final sonnets also employs the same shifts in rhythm and speed examined in the poems above, and each contains contrasting emotional responses to the subject matter contained therein. But a more important aspect to consider about these final two sonnets is that the poet seems to become more sure of himself and of his argument, and thus the tone of each is somewhat more confident than is the tone seen earlier in the sequence. The first twelve sonnets are urgent messages bent on convincing the reader that capital punishment is indeed necessary, whereas these final two sonnets assume that the reader has already been convinced, and thus look ahead to a brighter, safer future for both the reader and society. In sonnet thirteen, for example, Wordsworth says that, as the death sentence is handed down, the judge and his "Listeners" recognize the need for such action: "They know the dread requital's source profound;/ Nor is, they feel, its wisdom obsolete. . . ." And even from a religious standpoint Wordsworth is confident in his argument, since he feels that "the sacrifice" is not "unmeet/ For Christian Faith." We see, then, that the poet concludes his argument in a confident, self-assured manner. And when, in the fourteenth line, he asks that God "speed the blessed hour," it is obvious that Wordsworth has no doubts as to whether or not a time may come when capital punishment will no longer be needed, but is hopeful that such a time might come sometime in the near future.

The fourteenth sonnet also deals with the idea that better days lie ahead, if only the death penalty be maintained; but this poem suggests as well that the poet is now more free--than he has been in the past--to express

his ideas about capital punishment. Wordsworth finds that he has a more sympathetic, responsive audience than he once had, and therefore his "Imagination works with bolder hope. . . ." These lines suggest a tone that is confident in the fact that the poet's argument will have its desired effect--to convince the reader that capital pains are both necessary and justifiable. And the poet is also sure that, in the future, the death penalty will insure the safety of all society; thus, he and his readers "all may move/ Cheered with the prospect of a brighter day." Wordsworth admits that it will not be easy to achieve the goal he has set for himself and society, since he sees before him "a painful road"; but he is confident in the knowledge that, with the help of God, capital punishment will be the means by which "a brighter day" can be realized for the good of all mankind. Thus, Wordsworth maintains a serious attitude towards his subject throughout his conclusion and apology, but becomes convinced in these last two sonnets that his argument is sound, and that its impact upon the reader will have profitable and far-reaching consequences. We see again that the poet has achieved an overall unity of tone, while using a variety of feelings to express his attitude towards capital punishment.

In conclusion, it is obvious that Wordsworth maintains a serious and sincere tone throughout the sonnet sequence, and indeed his argument as it stands would be unconvincing if this were not the case. He approaches the topic in a straightforward manner, and does not rely upon humor or irony to help make his point. But the unity of tone seen in this work also involves Wordsworth's use of contrasting emotional responses in each sonnet, moving from animation to quietness, or vice versa. This technique of including "secondary" tones along with the overlying "primary" tone of seriousness

and sincerity helps Wordsworth deal with an issue that is very much charged with emotion itself. And it provides one more factor that contributes to the overall unity of the sonnet sequence.

V. Unity in Wordsworth's Point of View

Point of view is a final unifying factor in the sonnet sequence. Although Wordsworth employs past, present, and future tenses, his main emphasis in each sonnet is on the present.

In his social argument for capital punishment, Wordsworth draws examples and instances from the past to support his point; yet, each example is used to illustrate and emphasize the present situation regarding capital punishment. In the first sonnet, for example, he describes the prisoners and their journey to Lancaster Castle in the past tense; but this example is used to explain why "this spot" is now called "Weeping Hill." Likewise, the second sonnet presents a look into the past, when a man has committed a murder; the emphasis is nevertheless on our present attitude towards "worst offenders." And in the third sonnet there is a movement from the past to the present tense to show that the sense of duty which prevailed in past times prevails even today. The fourth sonnet, like the second, alludes to a time past when murder has been committed; the emphasis of the poem is, however, on the manner in which such an act is punished today. The fifth sonnet begins in the present tense, describing the actions of the "wise legislator," and then projects these actions into the future, in order to emphasize the importance of acting responsibly at the present time. The sixth sonnet employs the same technique: Wordsworth first points out the preventive power of conscience in the present tense, and then moves into

the future to show the implications and dangers of losing this power. Although past and future tenses are used in these sonnets, the action or state of being in each case is related directly to the issue of capital punishment as Wordsworth sees it in 1840.

Wordsworth's religious argument also emphasizes the present time. Though the seventh sonnet begins with references to ancient law and Christ's teachings, the manner in which those teachings are interpreted today is the emphasis of the poem. The eighth sonnet shifts to the future tense and, as was seen before, actions of the present determine consequences of the future: if capital punishment is abandoned, crime will be protected and hidden from the law. The ninth and tenth sonnets, on the other hand, are written entirely in the present tense: the ninth outlines the functions of the state, and the tenth deals with a theological argument against capital punishment. Sonnet eleven uses the conditional tense to compare the Mercy of capital punishment--alluded to in the present tense--to the less humane punishments that might be employed. And the twelfth sonnet does much the same: though the criminal becomes a Penitent when faced with death, he would merely resort to his old ways "were he cast on old temptations." Sonnet thirteen is written in the present tense, except for the exclamation in line seven that again alludes to the dangers of abolition; the emphasis of this sonnet is, however, on Wordsworth's present hope that capital punishment will disappear through lack of use. And while sonnet fourteen includes a reference to the past--when the poet has asked God for guidance--its main idea involves the present time and the decisions each member of society must make regarding the important issue of capital punishment.

Wordsworth maintains a consistent point of view throughout the sonnet sequence, dealing directly with considerations that are, for him,

current and contemporary. His references to past events serve the purpose of providing examples and comparisons with the present situation; and references to the future show the moral and social reasons capital punishment is necessary.

VI. Conclusion

While it is not the purpose of this paper to defend the sonnet sequence, and while it would be foolhardy to assert that these poems are among Wordsworth's best, I think it safe to say that critics have not given them the credit they deserve. It may be true that these sonnets do not possess the power and imagination many of the earlier works do; yet, they present a logical, coherent response to the argument that the death penalty should be abolished. Furthermore, Wordsworth exhibits the ability to employ a variety of tactics or approaches to accomplish his argumentative purpose. That is, he examines the subject from a variety of perspectives, ranging from consideration of the murderer in his cell to interpretation of Christ's influence on the question of capital punishment. His ability as a poet appears quite clearly in these instances, when he makes concrete the abstract and controversial aspects of his topic.

This paper has attempted to point out the sense of unity that Wordsworth has achieved in his Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death. By maintaining consistency of purpose, imagery, tone, and point of view he has created a single, coherent work, rather than a series of separate poems. This in itself is an accomplishment of refined and practiced artistic ability.

FOOTNOTES

¹Elizabeth Orman Tuttle, The Crusade Against Capital Punishment in Great Britain (London: Stevens & Sons, 1961), pp. 2-13.

²Henry Taylor, "Wordsworth's Sonnets," Quarterly Review, 69 (December, 1841), 39.

³Ibid., p. 41.

⁴John Lawrence, A History of Capital Punishment (New York: Citadel, 1960), p. 14.

⁵Mary Moorman, William Wordsworth, II (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 533.

⁶Ernest de Selincourt, ed., The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), II, 1000.

⁷Ibid., III, p. 1064.

⁸Moorman, p. 533.

⁹Taylor, p. 41.

¹⁰F. M. Todd, Politics and the Poet: A Study of Wordsworth (London: Methuen & Co., 1957), p. 206.

¹¹Edith C. Batho, The Later Wordsworth (London: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 222.

¹²Moorman, p. 535.

¹³Lee M. Johnson, Wordsworth and the Sonnet (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1973), p. 33.

¹⁴David Perkins, Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 2.

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A STUDY OF WORDSWORTH'S
SONNETS UPON THE PUNISHMENT OF DEATH

by

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In his Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death, published in 1842, William Wordsworth argues in defense of capital punishment, and thereby refutes the arguments of the abolitionists who are working at this time to do away with this most severe retribution. The fourteen poems which make up the sonnet sequence attempt to justify and show the need for capital law, by presenting both social and theological arguments for it. But though this work consists of fourteen separate poems, it remains a unified whole; Wordsworth achieves unity through maintaining consistency of purpose, imagery, tone, and point of view. By consistently attempting to justify the death penalty in each poem throughout the sequence, the poet achieves an overall unity in purpose. His purpose remains the same in every sonnet: to convince the reader that capital law must be maintained for the social and spiritual good of man. Similarly, Wordsworth employs a number of key images--those of the fortress, the dungeon, and the road--in various sonnets in order to unify the argument he is presenting. For Wordsworth, the fortress symbolizes the protective qualities of capital punishment, the dungeon symbolizes the ability of capital law to control and subdue crime, and the road alludes to the movement in England to abolish capital pains and the subsequent reaction to this movement. Furthermore, the poet's tone, one of straightforward seriousness and sincerity, also lends unity to the sonnet sequence; and the contrasting and balancing of two separate tones within a single poem is seen throughout the work, suggesting again an overall unity of poetic technique. Finally, the fact that Wordsworth maintains a consistent point of view, set in the present, points out that the poet has achieved unity.

All of these factors combine to suggest that the fourteen sonnets which make up this work are each a part of a unified, aesthetic whole.