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Many Interpretations, One Reality

It is unknown whether the author of this poem ever realized that his simple poem would be the subject of so much scrutiny. The poem is basically about a group of Gypsies standing on a green field when all of a sudden, the North Wind blows by and starts a fire in a group of nearby bushes. However, when run through the careful scrutiny of five of the authors whose literature we have read so far this quarter, the poem ceases to be just a simple story. It evolves complex meanings according to how the poem might be interpreted by each of the five authors, who are Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley, and Keats. Although each of these authors will derive his own interpretation of this poem, we discover that there is an underlying symmetry in these authors' interpretations. This symmetry is the need to understand the meaning of reality, and now we will see how each of these five authors have explored this need.

Of all the five writers listed, Wordsworth perhaps feels the most strongly about this poem. A person like Wordsworth would have the aesthetic appreciation of seeing a "group of Gypsies, centered on the green" and watching the action of Boreas as she "starts the quivering blaze behind / Short, shrubby bushes.' Wordsworth has a powerful sense of nature, and it is not difficult to imagine him saying the last stanza of this poem to himself as if he was the poem's author. Wordsworth feels that there is a deeper Spirit in life and that we are a part of something greater than ourselves. "So strong [life] pervades" for Wordsworth that his "all-attentive mind / Will oft exclaim. . . 'Grant me this life, thou Spirit of the Shades!'"

Also, Wordsworth believes that as we get older, we lose physical contact with nature, but we gain an aesthetic compensation. We are better able to appreciate nature's beauty, although we may be removed from it. In this poem, the author describes the scene by saying "When this I view," which means that the author is not participating in the scene. He is watching the scene from a distance, and although he is physically removed, he still has an aesthetic appreciation of the scene as evidenced by his exclamation in the last stanza.

Unlike Wordsworth, who writes about nature, Coleridge writes about supernature. Coleridge sees a supernatural influence in life, as demonstrated by Geraldine's role in Christabel and the Ancient Mariner's visits from demons. Coleridge would probably concentrate on this poem's setting, which takes place "in evening's dusky hour." He might also concentrate on the actions of Boreas, the god of the north wind, since Boreas is an abstract, intangible figure. Coleridge would probably see a supernatural streak in this poem upon recognizing that some superhuman power (Boreas), not the Gypsies, was responsible for "sudden[ly] start[ing] the quivering blaze." The line "Now lost, now seen, now bending with the wind" shows Boreas' supernatural nature since it suggests that she is both visible and invisible and therefore has no physical substance. Interpreting this poem in a supernatural sense, Coleridge would probably think highly of this poem because its supernatural theme fits in with his other works of literature we have read.

The first thing Blake might have noticed about this poem is its wonderful portrayal of innocence and experience. In this poem, there is a "group of Gypsies, centered on the green, / In some warm nook where Boreas has no power." The Gypsies are all just standing there, completely ignorant of Boreas' presence until all of a sudden she "starts [a] quivering blaze behind / Short, shrubby bushes." Such a sight probably would have wrenched the Gypsies out of their innocent state. One of Blake's beliefs is that once a person has fallen from innocence, that person cannot return. We saw this in "The Book of Thel" after the Clod of

Clay shows Thel the underground world of death, and Thel flees, hoping to return to her previous state of innocence. Blake tells us that she can never return. Similarly, the Gypsies cannot return to their previous state of innocence after witnessing the appearance of the blaze. Although Boreas may be "Now lost, now seen, now bending with the wind," she will always be there with her "proggling stick" to "[renew] the blaze." Therefore, the blaze will never disappear for the Gypsies; that experience will be with them forever, and they cannot hope to return to their previous innocent state.

Shelley believed that a poet's job was to translate the infinite into the finite. Stemming from this belief were his ideas that there is something divine behind the physical world, and that we can partially see this truth if all of our faculties are working together harmoniously. In this poem, we see the author trying to comprehend the meaning of the scene he sees. We know he is trying to do this because he exclaims in the last line, "Grant me this life, thou Spirit of the Shades!" The author of this poem would not have asked the Spirit to grant him such a life if he did not have a reason to desire it. We know that since the author is so strongly moved by this scene, he asks the Spirit to grant him "this life" because he wants to explore the source of his strong emotions toward this scene. The author wishes to glimpse the truth and to translate his infinite feelings and experiences of the scene into finite terms that he can deal with, which, to Shelley, is the ultimate goal of a poet.

Keats knew that he was going to die, and this knowledge had a profound effect on his later poetry. We think that his last poems would be filled with bitterness about life and the process of dying, but instead, his final poems are full of richness and vitality. This is a reason why Keats might have disliked the subject of this poem. Boreas, the North Wind, is a symbol of cold and ice, which are archetypal symbols of death. We know that Boreas represents coldness because the author contrasts Boreas with warmth in the line "In some warm nook, where Boreas has no power." However, Boreas defines our archetypal thoughts of her

by suddenly starting “the quivering blaze,” symbolizing warmth, and “With proggling stick she still renews the blaze,” which cause us to view her as a mother figure, nurturing the production of warmth. If cold symbolizes death, then warmth symbolizes life. Keats would have liked this poem because he would likely have seen a figure commonly associated with death bringing life into the world. This would have fit in with his belief that life was still rich, wonderful, and warm, although he would soon fall into the icy clasps of death.

Although Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley, and Keats each have different perspectives on what reality means to them, all of these authors would probably agree that there is something deeper to reality than what our senses can see. All of these authors would also likely agree that it is important to discover underlying truths in reality using any method necessary. For example, while Blake hates the senses because they block our true impression of reality, Shelley relies on sensual metaphors to translate the infinite into finite terms. Both authors, nevertheless, are able to see a deeper meaning in reality as a result. Our reading of this poem has taught us an important lesson--that although many different interpretations of the poem can be made, all interpretations are made because of the human desire to understand reality. If not for this innate desire, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley, and Keats would have said nothing about the poem, and all of literature would cease to be anything more than heaps of discarded text.

Wordsworth--concerned about nature. Had epiphanies, spots of time. Rock of ages, serious, steady, reflective. Powerful sense of nature. It is a restorative. It is spiritual; we feel and understand we are a part of something grander than ourselves. He goes into nature to find humanity in nature. As we lose physical intimacy with nature, we gain an aesthetic compensation.

Coleridge--intellectual writer. House of fire; amazing talker and genius. Had opium addiction because of rheumatoid arthritis. Many of his works were incomplete. Where Wordsworth wrote about nature, Coleridge often wrote about supernature, as in Christabel and the Ancient Mariner.

Shelley--job of poets is to translate the infinite into the finite. More behind the physical world. There is a divine power in the physical world. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Truth can be glimpsed partially only if all faculties are working together.

Keats--knew he would die, longed for love of Fannie Braune. Function of poetry--to rise above the personality of the poet. Must lose one's sense of ego to the material of the object. He shows a breadth of sympathy about life although he knows he will die. Talks about concrete things while using sensual imagery. Uses synaesthesia.

Blake--senses are bad. Keeps one from realizing true reality. All components of the personality must work together. Believed that too much experience is bad. Eden is seen only momentarily.