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Contents:

1. 'Quietude' - Short Story 1,617 words
2. Critical Commentary 1,196 words
3. Close Reading of 'We Are Seven' 1,393 words
4. Bibliography

Total Wordcount: 4,206

Quietude

When asked why I did it, my only answer was, 'How could I not?' To see my son walk again on his own two feet – to race through the ripening fields and feel the mud squelching between his toes. Who wouldn't want that for their child?

The accident was unexpected, but then, aren't they all? It was a brisk winter evening, and Marshall begged me to go down to Foxglove Lake. It had frozen over a few weeks before, and I'd promised him that when the ice was thick enough and not too patchy, we would dig out my childhood skates. The temperature had dipped that morning, and I readily agreed, on the condition that he listened to every word I said.

Our breath plumed in the air as we trudged through the latest snowfall hand in hand. Marshall had a skip in his step, and what I could see of his face, peeking out from between his hat and his scarf, was flushed pink.

'How fast do you think I can go, daddy?' he asked, almost slipping over in his eagerness.

'Faster than a bazillion rocket ships.'

Marshall stopped dead and wrinkled his little nose at me. 'That's silly, daddy.' he said, then his cheeks dimpled and his eyes shone with mirth. 'I want to be faster than a *hundred*-bazillion rocket ships.'

'Ah, of course. I'm sure you will.'

We came to the top of the steep knoll separating the village from the countryside. The grass glimmered with beads of ice and the lake spread out below us; a vast mirror already swarming with people who'd had the same idea as Marshall and I. It had been a while since I'd seen such a gathering. Young couples, children,

even a group of teenagers gathered at the edges of the ice, the blades of their new, fancy skates gleaming.

Marshall's grip on my hand tightened, and excitement gleamed in his eyes.

'Let's go, daddy!'

We raced down the knoll, our feet catching and sliding in the snow. As we drew close to the bottom, Marshall fell and dragged me down with him. We tumbled the rest of the way down the hill, coming to a giggling, breathless stop. Thankfully I'd maintained a grip on the skates and hadn't sliced myself on the blades. I climbed to my feet and pulled Marshall to his. Snow clung to his hat and scarf and the padded shoulders of his coat, making him look like a baby yeti. I pulled my phone out of my pocket (thankfully it had survived our tumble) and snapped a photo for his mother. Jenny would be in stitches.

Marshall's first steps onto the ice were wobbly. I held his hand as we made our way around the edges, avoiding other parents supporting their children. It was one of those rare winter nights when the ice sang. Throaty groans layered beneath haunting warbles echoed beneath us like the voice of an ancient sea creature. Marshall's face flooded with awe as he felt the ice vibrate beneath him.

'I want to try myself,' he said, twisting his mittened hands from my grip. At the time, encouraging independence was important to me. Jenny said I was taking it too far, that an eight-year-old still needed his dad. She was right. That evening, I let go of my son and he was lost to me.

Marshall's balance was excellent. I watched as he gathered confidence, moving across the ice like he was born to it. He would slow every time he came across another skater, rounding them at a considerate distance before picking up

speed again. Until then, the scene by the lake had been peaceful. Children and their parents, and young couples mostly, with the occasional pensioner recreating their youth. When the first speed skater zoomed past – one of the teenager's I'd spotted earlier- I didn't think much of it. Young people deserved their fun too. Then came another and another. I watched Marshall's confidence wane. I watched as his posture tilted and began to wobble. To this day, I hold on to the knowledge that I was about to head out to him. About to guide him safely back onto the snow, help him into his snow boots and head back up the knoll for a mug of well-deserved hot chocolate.

The first speed skater that collided with Marshall only clipped him, sending him spinning away from the edge of the ice. Miraculously, he managed to keep his balance, his arms windmilling frantically. The second tangled with him completely, sending them both crashing down and sliding out towards the middle of the lake. The other skater immediately climbed to his feet and made to skate off, no doubt embarrassed by the tumble, but the impact of his body and Marshall's had already set things in motion.

As I ran, slipping and sliding across the ice towards my son, the speed skater collapsed. A black, watery hole had opened beneath his feet, and the weight of his skates dragged him down. Scrambling for purchase, he grabbed hold of Marshall as he slid, and they both disappeared out of sight. I screamed as I raced towards the place they'd vanished but felt myself violently dragged backwards.

'Don't, the ice is already weak there. You'll go down too and bring more of us with you.'

I found myself looking into the face of a very old man. One of those pensioners who'd wanted to cling onto the remnants of his youth, no doubt. I stared at him dumbly as he ordered people to form a line. His words were dimmed by the wet thud of my heart pounding in my ears. Screams of 'call emergency services' flooded back in as the old man gripped onto my hand. He was surprisingly strong. By the time an ambulance arrived, our human chain had managed to fish both boys out of the water and carry them back to shore. Both were blue and struggling to breathe. I remember looking back over the lake from the back of the ambulance as Marshall and I sped away. There was a jagged black hole in the white expanse where the boys had fallen in. Splintered shards poked upright from around it, like great teeth. A shiver ran down my back at the fearful sight.

The following few weeks were a blur of hospital rooms, and crumpled faces and my son hooked up to machines that kept him alive. The other boy, stronger and older than Marshall, died as the ambulance was transporting him to hospital.

By the fifth week, Jenny and I had given up hope. If Marshall woke, he would never be the same again. Never walk, never talk, never graduate university, or get married, or have children. On the way back from buying another of the cafeteria's awful over-priced coffees, we discussed the possibility of turning off his life-support machines. We hadn't yet come to a decision when the doctor cornered us.

'The procedure is experimental,' he was sure to explain, 'though we have a proposed success rate of 84%.' Jenny's hand trembled in mine, as though a bolt of lightning had rippled through her body and into me. The phantom lightening lit me up from the inside, igniting a hope I'd thought was forever lost.

Snowflakes fluttered like pale moths beyond the window as the surgeons prepared to wheel Marshall - and the equipment keeping him alive - down to surgery. I remember his expression as he passed by me, buried to the chin in his blankets. He looked peaceful.

For five hours Jenny and I took turns pacing the hospital corridors and sitting in hard plastic chairs in the waiting room. In that anxious quietude my stomach writhed with nausea, made worse by the persistent scent of bleach in the air.

Eventually, the head surgeon peered out into the corridor. His mask was lowered and his tired eyes held an expression of triumph. 'We did it,' he said softly. We weren't allowed to see him for three days after his successful surgery, though his nurse gave us hourly updates. I'd sent Jenny home to get a proper night's sleep when the doctor who'd originally told us about the operation ushered me into Marshall's room. 'Your boy's taken to the chip very well. Brain surgery is tricky at the best of times, but I can say with confidence that young Marshall is on his way to a full recovery.'

He was sitting up in bed, when I first laid eyes on him. A feat we hadn't deemed possible a week ago. 'Marshall?' I said into the still air. His head turned, and I looked my boy full in the face for the first time in over a month. His eyes didn't meet mine, but in that moment I didn't care. I wrapped my arms around his stiff body and wept into his shoulder.

It wasn't until Marshall was finally discharged that we noticed a difference. It was subtle, at first. He would speak, when spoken to; move, when it was required of him; even turn his nose up at his greens. Yet no conversation was started unprompted. Jenny and I no longer experienced him running over to us, breathless

with excitement as he spouted off his latest unbelievable tale. We no longer saw him skip for joy or run bare foot through our back garden. Even his favourite food (spaghetti and meatballs) lay barely picked at on his plate.

‘What are we going to do?’ I asked Jenny, one night after we’d polished off two bottles of red between us.

Therapy was Jenny’s suggestion. ‘He’s been through a lot, love. The accident, the operation, his recovery.’ I nodded my agreement, but I knew that wasn’t it. There was an emptiness behind the boy’s eyes, where before had been the mischievous spark of life. Our son, I’d come to realise, had died the moment he’d entered the water. It wasn’t our child Jenny and I now co-existed with; it was his unrotting corpse.

‘We should have pulled your plug whilst we still had the chance.’ I whispered into Marshall’s ear that evening as I tucked him in. He didn’t say a word, only smiled up at me languidly, his dilated pupils two black frozen lakes.

Critical Commentary

The focus of this commentary is upon my short story '*Quietude*' and its exploration of the Romantic worldview. As with works like '*Frankenstein*' first published in 1818, I emphasised the concept of nature and emotion (Romantic school of thinking) over science and reason (Enlightenment school of thinking).¹ Bate suggests that if one 'historicizes the idea of an ecological viewpoint - a respect for the earth and a scepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society - one finds oneself squarely in the Romantic tradition; and it has strong contemporary force in that it brings Romanticism to bear on what are likely to be some of the most pressing political issues of the coming decade.'² Considering political issues such as global warming and bodily autonomy, I discuss both schools of thought and the roles they play in my short story later in the commentary. I also mention how I was inspired by the idea of the Sublime and how I integrated this concept into my story in a way that emphasises the overall themes of hubris, scientific exploitation and Nature.

I was inspired by the Kantian idea of the sublime, namely the untameable power of nature and the sense of fear one can gain from it. ³ In '*Quietude*', the protagonist fails to overcome his fear and face the Sublime nature of winter's power, leading to his turn to reason and science. He experiences this sense of fear when he looks back over the ice. The scene has changed in his mind, from one of peace and beauty, to one of terror. This theme is later reflected at the end of the story when he looks into his son's eyes and sees the frozen lake once more.

¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993)

² Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 9

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

The idea of humans playing God and attempting to triumph over nature is a fascinating concept. Similarly to the questions posed in '*Frankenstein*' I wondered, 'what if we could reverse death?' which led me to the exploration of, 'what if we could reverse the accidents and diseases that happen to innocent people?' Although the notion of curing illnesses is an intriguing one, where do we draw the line? An incident that got me thinking was the case of Adriana Smith, a pregnant woman in Georgia who, though clinically braindead, was forced to carry her unborn child to term due to state laws. Her parents were vehemently against this, but their will was overturned, and they were handed an extortionate medical bill at the end of it.⁴ Nature has been labelled as 'cruel', taking the young whilst leaving the old to suffer. However, humans are the ones who take cruelty to the extreme and destroy the world around them. I wished to show this in '*Quietude*' by juxtaposing the miracles that science is capable of with the consequences that can occur when nature is defied and human hubris triumphs. As stated by Barry, ecocriticism concerns the 'relationship between culture and nature.'⁵ Our culture is influenced daily by the natural world, from the food we eat, to the clothes we wear, to the geographical situation of our houses. In my short story, I wished to emphasise this interrelationship between the cultural and natural and make it apparent what happens when human's turn away from nature. From a Romantic perspective, I wanted to make it apparent that a person's emotions, morality and individuality should be considered, not vilified and overlooked as though humanity's only purpose is to achieve, progress and conquer.

⁴ Madaline Halpert, *Baby of brain-dead woman delivered in Georgia, woman's mother says* (2025), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1jwl9l9yneo>> [Accessed: 20 January 2026]

⁵ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017) p. 252

I also drew upon the romantic element of the sublime, reflected in Marshall and his father's view of the lake from atop a grassy knoll. Shaw defines the sublime as 'a state of mind,' the awe one feels in a particularly wild or beautiful place. The experience, he goes on to say, is almost 'transcendent.'⁶ The dramatic location of the icy lake spread out in front of the protagonists emphasises humanities insignificance in relation to the vast expanse of nature. Marshall and his father feel a sense of awe staring down at it. Just as in Wordsworth's 'A few miles above Tintern Abbey' the focus is on the natural world, I approached the beginning of '*Quietude*' similarly and made the focus of the narrative the snowy landscape. ⁷

As the story is told in first person, from the point of view of a father, my target audience is an adult demographic. The form is of a Romantic-Gothic short story.

My biggest influence for '*Quietude*' was Mary Shelley's '*Frankenstein*.' In *Frankenstein* Shelley shows a clear critique of Enlightenment reasoning. This was a popular mode of thinking amongst philosophers, such as John Locke in the seventeenth century.⁸ Shelley uses Victor as a warning against what happens when one becomes consumed purely by rational thinking. I emulated this by having my nameless protagonist accepting a doctor's reasoning on what was best for his son, rather than going with his heart and letting him go as nature intended. The consequences for this, as with The Monster in '*Frankenstein*', are catastrophic. Just as Victor loses everything dear to him - his wife, his brother, his best friend – my protagonist loses what he valued most about his son; his childlike joy and lease for

⁶ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007) p. 2

⁷ Dinah Birch. (2009). Tintern Abbey, Lines Composed a Few Miles above. In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (7th ed.). Oxford University Press.

⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (London: Eliz.Holt, 1689)
<<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10615/10615-h/10615-h.htm#chap2.01>> [Accessed 21 January 2026]

life. Unlike Shelley, I chose to leave my resolution more open-ended, hinting at the possibility that the protagonist could still salvage what he had done. In *Frankenstein*, the ending is more conclusive, with Victor dying and The Monster 'borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance.'⁹ Originally, I did intend to end the piece with Marshall dying at the hands of his father but ultimately decided that it was truer to the theme of human choices to leave it open-ended.

Throughout '*Quietude*' I used the wintery landscape as an extended metaphor for nature. Even when Marshall is in his hospital bed the snowflakes, 'fluttered like pale moths beyond the window,' hinting that it wasn't too late for the protagonist to change his mind and give in to whatever fate Nature had for the boy. Though not expressly said, I used the ice as a criticism of global warming. NASA emphasises that the increase in greenhouse gases is 'due to human activities... scientists can see a distinctive isotopic fingerprint in the atmosphere.'¹⁰ My short story is set in a time very close to our own and I wanted the reader to question why the ice collapsed. Were the two boys' weights heavy enough to break through, or was it due to the worrying fact that the earth is rapidly warming?

In conclusion, I was successful in writing a short story capturing the Romantic worldview and warning about the consequences of Enlightenment thinking if adhered to too completely. I believe I did so in a way that emulated and honoured the source material (*Frankenstein* and *Tintern Abbey*). Touching lightly on the ideas of the sublime gave my piece strength and helped emphasise the overall theme. Bennett and Royle purports that, 'Writers and critics are, however, well placed to analyse the

⁹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993) p.242

¹⁰ NASA, The Causes of Climate Change (2024) <<https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/causes/>> [Accessed: 21 January 2026]

ways in which this wasting of our world is not simply material or physical, but also rhetorical.¹¹ By writing 'Quietude' I took that rhetorical question and offered an idea of what the future could hold if humans don't care for the planet and individuality. I gained a deeper understanding of Romantic writing through doing so, as well as realising the areas I still need to develop, such as shaping my piece to have a more satisfying ending.

Close Reading of 'We are Seven'.¹²

'We are Seven' is a lyrical ballad that opens with an unnamed narrator meeting a 'little cottage girl'. This immediately paints the girl as a rustic country-dweller – in touch with nature purely through the circumstances of her upbringing. In the eighteenth century, with the rise of industrialism, the peasant was considered more in tune with the natural world. The rich even paid to have a vagrantesque 'hermit' living on their land to meet this aesthetic and give counsel. Campbell supports this, stating that 'many visitors to gardens respected the figure of the hermit as the embodiment of the ideals of solitary retirement and pleasing melancholy.'¹³ This is further emphasised in the poem by Wordsworth's description of the girl as having 'a rustic, woodland air', and being 'wildly clad.'

¹¹ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature Criticism and Theory* (6th edn) (London: Routledge, 2023) p. 204

¹² William Wordsworth, *We Are Seven*, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52298/we-are-seven>> [Accessed: 22 January 2026]

¹³ Gordon Campbell, *The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Ornamental Gnome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 2

Wordsworth's focuses on a select few key themes throughout the poem. Childhood is a large one, with him representing the girl as an entity of her own, with her own thoughts and beliefs. In the eighteenth century, there was an emergence of thought as the child as an individual. O'Malley stresses that, '[d]uring this time... people began to define children as inherently different from adults: as impressionable, unformed beings who require much protection and attention from adult caretakers, who are in turn expected to regard youngsters with deep affection and nostalgia.'¹⁴ The fact that the girl is a child emphasises her innocence; due to it, she has a less anthropocentric view of the world and a deeper connection to nature. Compared to the rational adult, she has more of an intuitive, ecological understanding of the world. O'Malley emphasises that, 'the idea that children were by nature good and were only corrupted by exposure to society became a staple of Romantic thinking'¹⁵ Other themes include morality and resilience in the face of grief.

The little graveyard cottage serves as a microcosm of the natural world. Within its boundaries Wordsworth emphasises the passing of the seasons, the death of family members and the continuation of life through grief. By keeping her siblings alive in her memories, the girl is better able to manage her grief, in a way that would be stilted and cold when viewed from the adult's rational perspective. In stanza twelve, the girl states that 'often after sun-set' she will take her dinner and sit by the graves of her siblings. The sun setting on this microcosm once more represents the transition between the natural cycles of life and the girl's connection to it. Though the

¹⁴ Andrew O'Malley, *The Eighteenth-Century Child, Representing Childhood* (2005)
<https://www.representingchildhood.pitt.edu/eighteenthcent_child.htm> [Accessed: 22 January 2026]

¹⁵ Andrew O'Malley, *The Eighteenth-Century Child, Representing Childhood* (2005)
<https://www.representingchildhood.pitt.edu/eighteenthcent_child.htm> [Accessed: 22 January 2026]

day 'dies', the girl continues as if it hadn't, eating from her 'little porringer'. Regarding liminality, Lörke observes that, 'Romantic a-limitation does not imply the complete disregard for, or the dissolution of boundaries. It is the oscillation between the transgression, transcendence, or dissolution of a boundary and its reinstatement.'¹⁶ The girl herself serves as the dissolution of and reinstatement of this boundary, almost serving as its gatekeeper. Despite the narrator's increasing exasperation of the girl to refuse to acknowledge that she is now one of five, not seven, she restates and reinstates the nature of the world as she sees it.

When asked how many siblings she has, the child states she is one of seven but that two of her siblings are dead and 'in the churchyard lie.' She and her mother live nearby 'in the church-yard cottage.' This closeness to her dead siblings, and that fact that she is adamant that she is still one of seven, emphasises her link to nature and childish imagination. Duncum supports this by emphasising that, 'In the age-old binary between raw nature and sophisticated culture, innocent children have been long claimed for nature.'¹⁷ The cottage itself poses as a liminal space between life and death, nature and society, both of which the girl exhibits by virtue of being a child. In contrast, the narrator sees things from a binary, adult point of view. As two of the girl's siblings are deceased, he deems it impossible for her to be one of seven and asks, in bewilderment, her how this can be so. 'I pray you tell, Sweet Maid, how this may be.'

Death is deemed societally as a separation between the living and the deceased. We can see that through our use of language; the dead are generally

¹⁶ Melanie Maria Lörke, *Liminal Semiotics: Boundary Phenomena in Romanticism* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011) p. 33

¹⁷ Paul Duncum, *Images of Childhood: A visual History from Stone to Screen* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023) p. 216

referred to in the past tense. 'He was always so happy,' 'she was the love of my life,' and so forth. The girl, however, refers to her siblings as if they are very much present and a part of her life. They, 'in the church yard lie,' where they are 'side by side' in 'graves of green, they may be seen.' Despite their absence, her brother and sister are still very much a part of her life. She can see them from her house and visit them whenever she wishes. In a sense, they are still very much a part of her everyday experience. Rowhanimanesh supports this view, emphasising that, on the nature of the impermanence of death 'the girl's imagination helps her come to that conclusion.'

¹⁸ Her unseen relationship with her dead siblings reflects an optimistic childhood spirit. By her very nature she refuses to believe that just because her siblings are gone, she is no longer one of seven. In a manner, she is correct. The girl's mother birthed seven children and no matter how many die, she will *always* have been one of seven. If we look at the concept of family in this manner, it is the adult who, despite his insistence on being a man of reason, is reduced to a ridiculous figure. He sticks to his rational beliefs despite the evidence presented to him by the girl. In his ignorance and inability to change, he is blind to the world of the child and his own flaws. This then presents the girl as a Lockean 'tabular rasa' - a blank slate, leaving her open to change. ¹⁹ As a child she is a well of potential, whereas the adult is a fully formed being firmly planted in his views, whether they be correct or not.

The fact that the children's deaths are so heavily tied to the seasons reinforces the idea that death is a natural part of life. Despite the young ages of the deceased, their parting does not upset the natural balance but is rather an essential

¹⁸ Mohammadreza Rowhanimanesh, British Romantic Poetry and the Concept of Childhood, *Studies in Literature and Language*, 2.2 (2011), pp. 179-184

¹⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (London: Eliz.Holt, 1689)
<<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10615/10615-h/10615-h.htm#chap2.01>> [Accessed 21 January 2026]

part of it. This is highlighted respectively in stanzas fourteen and fifteen, where the girl mentions that ‘when the grass was dry, together round her grave we played,’ and ‘when the ground was white with snow... my brother John was forced to go.’ Just as the seasons passed, so did the children – a cyclical nature that is not deemed out of the ordinary by the girl. In a way the children are like bulbs planted and waiting out a long winter to be reborn. Just as a bulb is out of view but not gone in the colder parts of the year, in the girl’s mind, neither are her siblings. They have simply changed form. This is reinforced by the view that the churchyard is not seen by her as a place of solemnity and finality, but a living, green space where she can take her supper, mend her stockings and play. In this manner, the girl acts as a bridge between the living and the dead.

As the poem progresses, the girl becomes more insistent that she is one of seven. This repetition - ‘Nay, we are seven!’ - and the narrator’s increased exasperation - ‘But they are dead; those two are dead!’ emphasises the girl’s rejection of societal norms and the narrator’s conformity to them.

To conclude, Wordsworth’s ‘We are Seven’ is a poem representing childhood, human spirit and resilience. The girl’s graveyard is a microcosm of what the world could be if one was to view it from a romantic perspective. The girl’s rejection of societal norms helps her with her grief and to still feel connected to the siblings she loved and lost. El-Shrou believes that ‘the poem’s tone balances sadness and optimism, reflecting the struggle between losing childhood innocence and the resilience of the human spirit.’²⁰ Indeed, this resilience is proven when the girl has

²⁰ Nabeeha Mohammad Saleh El-Shrou, A Discourse Analysis of William Wordsworth’s ‘We Are Seven’, *Remittances Review*, 8.4 (2023) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/rr.v8i4.208> p. 3012

the final say, 'The little Maid would have her will, and said, "Nay, we are seven!"' The girl's worldview, and through her, Wordsworth's, becomes the predominant one.

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