A child’s perception is often veiled through innocence and curiosity. The poem, “We are Seven”, reflects upon this innocence by portraying the opinion of a little girl who claims to have six other siblings despite the fact that two of them are dead. Juxtaposing her outlook, the adult speaker argues that because two of her siblings are dead, they are only “five” and not the “seven” that the little girl insists them to be. On this topic of death, Wordsworth states the objective of the poem is to show “the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion.” This stresses the fact that the girl is clearly unable to comprehend death in the conventional way that adults seem to and as the poem develops, our sympathies transfer from the speaker to this little girl. Through the tone, sensory imagery and diction present in the dialogic interplay between the rustic child and urban adult in “We are Seven”, Wordsworth places emphasis on the beauty of the little girl’s simplistic view of death—a concept that adults tend to overcomplicate and corrupt.

The shift and contrasts in tone throughout the poem reflect the development of readers’ compassion regarding the value in the little girl’s innocence. At first readers simply perceive the child as naïve but later come to the conclusion that she may actually know more about death than the man himself. The edifying tone adopted by the speaker immediately portrays the poem as an argument rather than a natural exchange of feelings. This is most evident in the line, “And where are they, I pray you tell?” (17), which has an almost interrogative feel. The caesura illustrates the man’s scorn and thus shows us that the man has no desire to learn from the little girl, but instead he wants to instruct her. The criticism being indirectly made of the speaker’s stance in this regard becomes obvious when one shed’s light on Wordsworth desire to learn from the common people. The obstinate quality of the poem is further emphasized by the regular rhythm and ABAB rhyme scheme that is predominant. As a result of this, we perceive not only the stubborn cynicism of the narrator, but also the steadfastness of the child’s conviction that they are “seven”. The poem thus seems to end with neither being able to convince the other of their view of reality. However, the biblical allusions to God and heaven in the lines “Till God Released her of her pain” (53) and “Their spirits are in heaven!” (67) suggest that the little girl comprehends that her siblings are dead but also emphasizes that this does not mean that they have seized to exist for if their spirits are in heaven they cannot truly be gone. At this point we see the tension reach a peak through the use of anaphora in “but they are dead; those two are dead!” (65). The exclamation mark punctuating the man’s word show us that he has finally given up on swaying the little’s girl’s opinion. As he exhibits petulant, childlike behavior in his frustration, the little girl says patiently
once again “we are seven” (69). This convinces readers to side with the little girl and finally accept that her understanding of death is one that is more profound.

Similarly, the elaborately detailed imagery that evoke our senses highlight the little girl’s reality and thus allow us to further empathize with her. One such example of this imagery is evident through the seasons. It shows us that her siblings, even in death, are a routine part of her daily activities. During the summer, she tells us “their graves are green, they may be seen” (37). The internal rhyme present in this image emphasizes the beauty of these graves and the green can almost be perceived as a symbol for life with its vibrant colour. Later she goes on to tell us “the ground was white with snow” (57). Here we can pick up on the alliteration with the letter “w” that once again makes the image more prominent. Readers may infer that, through the use of these seasons, the relationship the little girl cultivates with her siblings is a long term one. She spends time with them all year round. In fact they are so present, that often she comes to their graves to eat her supper, sing and knit. She refuses to simply cast the dead out her life but instead accepts them as they are and adapts her life to accommodate them.

Moreover, the little girl’s clear lack of grief is also depicted through Wordsworth’s diction. Firstly, it can be noted that she does not deny the fact that her sibling are dead but the use of the neutral word “lie” to describe their burial, suggests they are not lost forever. They have simply taken residence in a different place now. This is exemplified in a similar sense when she describes Jane’s death as God “[releasing] her of her pain” (51) and John as being “forced to go” (61). None of these deaths are brutal and morbid but simply stated factually. There is no bitterness and they are still very much a part of her life. Supporting this is the little’s girl’s use of personalized nouns such as “my sister” and “my brother.” The use of these words in the present tense make her position regarding their deaths evident in the sense that they are very much a current part of her life. This intensifies the tension present between her and the man for their views only seem to further diverge.

By having characters with opposing sentiments argue on the subject of death, Wordsworth subtly manages to show the strength and beauty that lies with innocence. He does this by painting the little girl’s perception in a better light for the child’s patience and naivety make her an easily likable character as compared to the man, who by the end only seems bitter. Experiencing the contentment of the child allows readers to infer that her method of dealing with dead is one that is more satisfying.
Works Cited