

**WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)**

**“The Solitary Reaper”**

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| 1. Behold her, single in the field,      | 17. Will no one tell me what she sings?-- |
| 2. Yon solitary Highland Lass!           | 18. Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow    |
| 3. Reaping and singing by herself;       | 19. For old, unhappy, far-off things,     |
| 4. Stop here, or gently pass!            | 20. And battles long ago:                 |
| 5. Alone she cuts and binds the grain,   | 21. Or is it some more humble lay,        |
| 6. And sings a melancholy strain;        | 22. Familiar matter of to-day?            |
| 7. O listen! for the Vale profound       | 23. Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,   |
| 8. Is overflowing with the sound.        | 24. That has been, and may be again?      |
| 9. No Nightingale did ever chaunt        | 25. Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang   |
| 10. More welcome notes to weary bands    | 26. As if her song could have no ending;  |
| 11. Of travellers in some shady haunt,   | 27. I saw her singing at her work,        |
| 12. Among Arabian sands:                 | 28. And o'er the sickle bending;—         |
| 13. A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard | 29. I listened, motionless and still;     |
| 14. In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird, | 30. And, as I mounted up the hill,        |
| 15. Breaking the silence of the seas     | 31. The music in my heart I bore,         |
| 16. Among the farthest Hebrides.         | 32. Long after it was heard no more.      |

**Notes**

1] Coleridge, Wordsworth, and his sister had visited the Scottish Highlands in 1803. Dorothy's *Recollections* for September 13 that year notes: "It was harvest time, and the fields were quietly—might I be allowed to say pensively?—enlivened by small companies of reapers. It is not uncommon in the more lonely parts of the Highlands to see a single person so employed." In a note to the 1807 edition, Wordsworth traced the poem's source: "This Poem was suggested by a beautiful sentence in a MS Tour in Scotland written by a Friend, the last line being taken from it *verbatim*." Thomas Wilkinson's manuscript, *Tours to the British Mountains* (London, 1824), states: "Passed a Female who was reaping alone: she sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard: her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious, long after they were heard no more" (12). [Note: "single" is a revision from "singing" in an earlier manuscript.]

2] *Highland*: mountainous region in northern Scotland associated with the Celtic clans.

7] *Vale profound*: broad, deep valley between two high ranges; possibly the world itself, as a place of suffering (OED "vale" 2b). Wordsworth takes this from conventional poetic diction; cf. Gilbert West's "Education. A Poem" (1751), lines 617-20: "On to the Centre of the Grove they stray'd; / Which . . . / Disclosed to sudden View a Vale profound . . ."

9] *Nightingale*: a small song-bird, well-known for the male's musical notes in the mating and nesting season. In Classical myth, the female nightingale is that to which Philomela, tragically raped and mutilated by her sister Procne's husband, metamorphoses on carrying out her revenge.

13] [Note: "voice" is a revision from "sound" in an earlier manuscript.]

14] *Cuckoo-bird*: song-bird migrating to Britain in the spring and associated with renewal.

16] Hebrides: islands northwest of Scotland in the Atlantic.

18] *plaintive numbers*: Wordsworth uses a conventional poetic phrase here ["numbers"='musical rhythms' or 'poetic meter']

21] *humble lay*: Wordsworth uses conventional poetic diction again here ["humble"='lowly' or "of low birth"; "lay"='song']

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**Rhyme:** ababccdd or abcbdde

**Commentary by Ian Lancashire** (2002/9/9)

Wordsworth's preface to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* argues that poetry "contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents." It ought not be judged by the presence of artificial, poetic diction. Rather, "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society" can be its medium. "The Solitary Reaper" exemplifies these beliefs.

Written seven years after *Lyrical Ballads*, it describes a nameless listener's delight in a young woman's melancholy song in an unknown language as, working by herself in a Scottish valley, she swings a sickle, reaping grain. Four eight-line stanzas, each closing with two couplets and all written in octosyllabic lines, have a musical lilt. Short lines deliver the rhymes at a quick pace. Sentences normally need two or more such short lines to complete, so that few lines are strongly end-stopped; most freely enjamb. Diction is conversational. Often lines consist mainly of monosyllabic words (4-5, 13, 17, 21, 24, 27, 30-32). Wordsworth prefers common verbs, "behold," "reap," "sing," "stop," "pass," "cut," "bind," "chant," "hear," and "break." Words imported into English from Latin or Greek, like "solitary" and "melancholy" or forms with "-ive" and "-ion" endings (e.g., "plaintive" and "motionless"), are infrequent.

Wordsworth writes plain, almost undemanding verse. For example, he repeats the simplest idea in varying words. The girl is "single," "solitary," and "by herself" (1-3). She is "reaping" (3), that is, "cuts and binds the grain" (5), "o'er the sickle bending" (28). The onlooker is both "motionless and still" (29). The lass "sings" (3, 17, 25, 27) or does "chant" (9) a "strain" (6), a "lay" (21), or "a song" (26). The speaker relies on everyday idioms, worn to vagueness by overuse in ordinary talk. Her "theme" (25) is of "things" (19) or "matter" (22) "That has been, and may be again" (24). This excludes only what never existed at all. Whenever the speaker might become elevated in speech, his language seems prosaic, even chatty: "Will no one tell me ..." (17), "Whate're the theme" (25), and "Long after it was heard no more" (32). Wordsworth notes, pointedly, that this last line comes *verbatim* from a prose travel book.

"The Solitary Reaper" does not implement, programmatically, his dogma of plain diction. For example, "Vale profound" (7), "plaintive numbers" (18), and "humble lay" (21) are semi-formulaic catch phrases in the very eighteenth-century verse whose artificiality he rejects. These exceptions may be deliberate, characterizing the speaker (not Wordsworth) as someone for whom poetry means much. He resorts to formulas as if to hint that the girl's song is out-of-place in the valley, however separated from the traditions of fine verse by her class, occupation, and location. Wordsworth may deliberately impoverish his speaker's language so as to contrast it with the reaper's song.

Unlike other poets, this lass sings alone, isolated from both her predecessors (her "poetic tradition") and any audience. Dryden, Pope, Gray, and so many others defined themselves by quoting from classical literature and each other. Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" shatters this continuity. Her song, like a found poem, springs directly from nature, without literary context. Her "music" runs like water ("overflowing" the valley) and surpasses the beauty of two celebrated English song-birds, the nightingale and the cuckoo. Here again the speaker raids conventional poetic language, as if incapable of finding truly suitable language. Ironically, both his analogies break down. Reaping takes place at harvest time, in the autumn, not in the spring or summer, seasons traditionally associated with the cuckoo and the nightingale. The reaper, a single "Maiden" (25), hardly fits the myth of married Philomela, rape victim and tragic revenger, even though the reaper sings in a melancholic, plaintive way about "Some natural sorrow" (23). The strange language in which the lass chants also removes her from any poetic tradition known to the speaker. He comprehends only her "sound," "voice," and "music," though it rings in his heart -- his memory -- "long after it was heard no more" (32).

This simple confession redeems the speaker from his own impoverished language. He bears witness to something that eighteenth-century poetry seemed at times embarrassed of. What transfixes him in song is not its content, but its emotionally expressive music. The listener does not understand why she sings in melancholy, only what the emotion itself is. This feeling "could have no ending" (26), as if she, like Keats' Ruth amid the alien corn, communicates wordlessly something universal about the human condition. Despite its sadness, the song helps the speaker to mount up the hill (30). In current psychology, the capacity to feel emotion and link it to goals makes life, indeed survival itself, possible. The speaker's "heart" (31), by bearing her music, can go on. For that reason, "The Solitary Reaper" relates an ecstatic moment in which a passer-by transcends the limitations of mortality. Both the song and he go on together.

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“The Solitary Reaper” is a poem by the English poet William Wordsworth. The poem was inspired by the poet’s trip to Scotland in 1803 with his sister Dorothy Wordsworth. It was first published in 1807. You can read the full text of “The Solitary Reaper” here. Get. Get. LitCharts. Get the entire guide to “The Solitary Reaper” as a printable PDF. Download it! The Full Text of “The Solitary Reaper”. 1Behold her, single in the field, 2Yon solitary Highland Lass!