

## The poet William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was a romantic poet. He wrote poetry full of imagery, usually based on the natural world. His poetry is mostly subjective like other romantic poets. He lived during the era of the French Revolution which he supported at the start but became against later on. Some scholars advocate that relationship of Wordsworth with his sister, Dorothy was far from plutonic love. But Wordsworth did marry and lived with both his sister and wife. Samuel Coleridge, a best friend of Wordsworth, was a great poet of the romantic era. He was a contemporary poet who accelerated his romantic vision. Both were true lovers of nature and they were active members of the Romanticism Movement.

## Introduction to the poem The Solitary Reaper

The poem Solitary Reaper is a pure pastoral poem written in a rustic setting. This poem reflects a beautiful reflection of nature. In this poem, the poet sees a Highland girl singing and cropping in a field. The poet was surprised by her song which was sweeter than the songs of nightingale and cuckoo-birds. The soothing effects of the songs are muchly pleasurable and leave an unforgettable impact on the mind and heart of the poet.

‘The Solitary Reaper’ is one of Wordsworth’s best-known poems. Although it’s a ballad, it didn’t appear in Wordsworth’s most famous collection, *Lyrical Ballads*, because he wrote it after the publication of that volume (co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge) in 1798. ‘The Solitary Reaper’ appeared in Wordsworth’s 1807 collection *Poems in Two Volumes*.

## Words & Their Meanings

**Behold** - to look at or see somebody or something

**Yon** - over there (old use)

**Solitary** - single or alone

**Highland Lass** - a girl who lives in the highlands (mountain regions) of Scotland

**Melancholy strain** - sad song

**Vale** – Valley

**Profound** - deep, having or come from a great depth

**Chaunt** - chant, sing

**Weary** - very tired after working hard for a long time

**Band** - a group of people

**Haunt** - a place visited frequently

**Shady haunt** - oasis, a place with water and trees in a desert for rest and relaxation

**Arabian sands farthest Hebrides** - the desert of Arabia (the Middle East)

**Plaintive numbers** - - the most remote group of islands that lies to the north-west of Scotland

**Humble lay** - ordinary song

**Sickle** - a tool for cutting grass or paddy

**Motionless** - without movement

**Scotland** - A country which is a part of the United Kingdom

## **‘The Solitary Reaper’: summary**

The poet orders his listener to behold a “solitary Highland lass” reaping and singing by herself in a field. He says that anyone passing by should either stop here or “gently pass” so as not to disturb her. As she “cuts and binds the grain” she “sings a melancholy strain,” and the valley overflows with the beautiful, sad sound. The speaker says that the sound is more welcome than any chant of the nightingale to weary travellers in the desert and that the cuckoo-bird in spring never sang with a voice so thrilling.

### **First Stanza**

**Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland Lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the Vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound.**

### **Summary**

The poem opens with a beautiful scene full of imagery. The first stanza of the poem reveals a true depiction of a pastoral/rustic setting. Being a romantic poet of nature, Wordsworth depicts a beautiful picture of nature where a Highland girl is singing and reaping in the field which shocks the poet and made him stop for a while to ponder on the hidden beauty and music of nature. The girl is reaping the crop and singing a melancholy song. The poet’s heart throbs with a feeling of joy by this beautiful scene and music of the song sung by the Highland girl. He does not like to disturb the girl

and does not let her know that someone is passing by her or observing her so that's why he says to the passers-by either to stop there for a while or to pass gently from there without making noise. The word solitary clearly explains that the girl is alone in the field and there is no one to disturb her. The Highland girl is cutting and binding the crop keeping herself busy with singing a song. This beautiful song is melancholy but the poet is unable to understand it clearly. Though the poet like it very much and wants everybody to listen to it. The sweet music of the song is echoing in the whole valley.

## **Second Stanza**

**No Nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travellers in some shady haunt,  
Among Arabian sands:  
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard  
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides.**

## **Summary**

The song of the solitary reaper was really very sweet and charming. In the second stanza, the poet compares the singing of the girl with nightingales and cuckoo-birds. In the poet's opinion, the nightingale is famous for its singing especially when tired travelers are taking a rest in the Arabian desert at an Oasis, and enjoy the music of the nightingale. Here poet wants to clear that the music of the girl's singing is much more soothing than the nightingales. The song of the girl is giving much more comfortable than that of the nightingale. Poet clearly states that no nightingale could have sung so nicely as the Highland reaper sang.

After making it clear that the song of the girl is sweet than that of the nightingale, poets also make another comparison that the songs of cuckoo-birds are also less sweet than the song of the solitary reaper. The poet says that the singing of the girl is more thrilling than the cuckoo birds which break the silence of the seas among the faraway Hebrides with their sweet songs. The cuckoos sing welcome songs to welcome the sailors in the Hebrides islands in the northeast. Their songs are also very sweet like the music of the nightingale. But, according to the experience of the poet, the song of the solitary reaper seemed sweeter than the songs of the cuckoo birds.

### Third Stanza

**Will no one tell me what she sings? —  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago:  
Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of to-day?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again?**

### Summary

In the third stanza, the poet tries to explain the song sung by the solitary reaper. The poet is enjoying the music of the song but he is unable to comprehend the meaning of the song. The language in which the girl is singing is incomprehensible to the poet but he likes it very much. The poet does not know the exact theme of the song but he can guess it. The poet is also curious to know the meaning of the song and wants somebody to tell him about the theme of the

song. He thinks that the song is about unhappy incidents of the past or of some battles in the past.

The poet also guesses that this song may be about some familiar matter related to the life of the Highland girl. The poet also speculates that the song may also be about some loss, pain, or natural sorrow which has happened to the girl.

### **Last Stanza**

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending; —  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.

### **Summary**

The poet couldn't understand too much about the theme of the song that she was singing. But whatever the theme of the song, it affected the poet's heart deeply and he enjoyed the song heartily. The poet thinks that like her work, her song seemed endless and there is no end to the Highland girl's singing. The poet watches her singing and using the sickle to do her work at the same time in the field. The poet says that he listened to her song standing quietly for a long time without making any kind of movement or noise. When the poet climbed up the hill, he says that he still remembered the sweet music of the girl's song. The poet also says that he will always remember her singing and will keep it in his heart though he could no longer hear it.

### ‘The Solitary Reaper’: meter

‘The Solitary Reaper’ is written in iambic tetrameter (although the fourth line in each stanza is a trimeter), rhymed ***abcddde*** in stanzas 1 and 4, and ***ababccdd*** in the two middle stanzas. In terms of the poem’s form, it is modeled on a Tuscan verse form which has been called the Italian equivalent of the English ballad.

‘The Solitary Reaper’ is a quintessentially Romantic poem in many respects: its ballad form, its focus on solitariness among nature (the girl is reaping in the fields of the wild highlands), and its emphasis on human emotion (‘plaintive numbers’; ‘natural sorrow, loss, or pain’). Its ending is similar to another famous poem Wordsworth published in his 1807 collection: ‘**I wandered lonely as a cloud**’, also known as ‘the daffodils poem’. That poem, too, ends with Wordsworth recalling his encounter with the poem’s subject (the daffodils in that poem; the reaper in this one) and being able to recollect it long after the event is over.

## Commentary

Along with “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” “The Solitary Reaper” is one of Wordsworth’s most famous post-*Lyrical Ballads* lyrics. In “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth said that he was able to look at nature and hear “human music”; in this poem, he writes specifically about real human music encountered in a beloved, rustic setting. The song of the young girl reaping in the fields is incomprehensible to him (a “Highland lass,” she is likely singing in Scots), and what he appreciates is its tone, its expressive beauty, and the mood it creates within him, rather than its explicit content, at which he can only guess. To an extent, then, this poem ponders the limitations of language, as it does in the third stanza (“Will no one tells me what she sings?”). But what it really does is praise the beauty of music and its fluid expressive beauty, the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” that Wordsworth identified at the heart of poetry.

By placing this praise and this beauty in a rustic, natural setting, and by and by establishing as its source a simple rustic girl, Wordsworth acts on the values of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem’s structure is simple—the first stanza sets the scene, the second offers two bird comparisons for the music, the third wonders about the content of the songs, and the fourth describes the effect of the songs on the speaker—and its language is natural and unforced. Additionally, the final two lines of the poem (“Its music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more”) return its focus to the familiar theme of memory, and the soothing effect of beautiful memories on human thoughts and feelings.

“The Solitary Reaper” anticipates Keats’s two great meditations on art, the “Ode to a Nightingale,” in which the speaker steepes himself



in the music of a bird in the forest—Wordsworth even compares the reaper to a nightingale—and “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in which the speaker is unable to ascertain the stories behind the shapes on an urn. It also anticipates Keats’s “Ode to Autumn” with the figure of an emblematic girl reaping in the fields.

### Analysis and Critical Appreciation of The Solitary Reaper

William Wordsworth made the solitary Reaper a real figure through his unmatched expressions. The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings arising from emotions recollected in tranquillity makes the readers to feel that they have met with the solitary reaper somewhere in their life, or they will meet her soon. In the poem, Wordsworth describes the melodious song of a solitary reaper who is cropping and singing. The poet finds her song to be sweeter than the song of the nightingale and cuckoo-birds. The song of the nightingale and the cuckoo are pleasant and provide refreshing and soothing effects. The poet compares and establish a fact that the song of the solitary reaper is simply incomparable in its music melody, in soothing effects, and in sweetness.

The words of the poem are incomprehensible for the poet but he like the song. Its plaintive tone and melancholy sound touch his heart deeply. he puts forwards a few rhetorical questions to show his curiosity. He asks if someone who can comprehend the meaning of the song, tell him. He guessed the theme of the song and says that it may be from past battels or from the personal life of solitary reaper. The girl’s song made a great impact on the poet’s mind and heart that makes the incident a memorable one. He stands still, motionless for a long time listening to her song and carries it in his heart. The song stays with the poet as a pleasant memory and can be heard after it is heard no more.

## Major Themes in The Solitary Reaper

Throughout Wordsworth's work, nature provides the ultimate good influence on the human mind. Wordsworth repeatedly emphasizes the importance of nature to an individual's intellectual and spiritual development. A good relationship with nature helps individuals connect to both the spiritual and the social worlds. This poem also carries a clear picture of nature that appeals to human minds. William Wordsworth praised the power of the human mind. Using memory and imagination, individuals could overcome difficulty and pain. For instance, the Speaker in "The Solitary Reaper" believes that he has remembered the song in his memory but could not hear it anymore.

He also emphasized on soothing effects of nature in the poem. He also compares the songs of nightingales, cuckoo-birds, and a girl's song and concludes that the soothing effects of the girl's song are much more sweet than others. He actually wants to clear that nature heals the human minds but we should feel the music of nature that creates soothing effects.

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