

'The Solitary Reaper'

-William Wordsworth

A Brief Background

William Wordsworth is one of the most important English poets and a founder of the Romantic Movement of English literature, a style of writing that focuses on emotion and imagination. Wordsworth became known as a Lakeland Poet because of the area where he lived, which is renowned for its beautiful, wild landscapes, charming pastures, and countless lakes. He was often called a nature poet because of his emphasis on the connection between humans and the natural world. He became widely successful and was named Poet Laureate of England in 1843.

'**The Solitary Reaper**' was written on November 5, 1805, and published in 1807 in the collection *Poems, in Two Volumes*. This poem is unique because while most of Wordsworth's work is based closely on his own experiences, 'The Solitary Reaper' is based on the experience of someone else, author and friend Thomas Wilkinson, as described in his *Tours to the British Mountains*.

The poem, like most of Wordsworth's poetry, is distinguished by its straightforward use of language and meter as well as its natural theme and imagery. It reflects Wordsworth's belief in the importance of the natural world, the power of memory and the human mind, and his first principle of poetry - that poetry should be written to provide pleasure through a rhythmic and powerful expression of emotion and leave readers with 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' long after it is read. Let's take a look at the text of the poem and then discuss what it might mean.

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.

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.

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?

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 poem begins with the speaker asking readers to behold a young girl 'reaping and singing by herself' in a field. The song the girl sings is a sad song, and anyone passing by, the speaker says, should either stop and listen or 'gently pass' so as not to disturb her. He is so struck by the sad beauty of her song that the whole valley seems to overflow with its sound.

In the second stanza, the speaker compares the girl's singing to that of a nightingale and a cuckoo bird. He says that the song she sings is more welcome than any nightingale might sing to weary travelers in the desert, and the sound of her voice is more thrilling to hear than the cuckoo-bird in spring. He is utterly enchanted, although as we see in the next stanza, he cannot understand the language of the song and so cannot say what the song is about.

In the third stanza, the speaker tries to imagine what the song might be about. Given its sad tune, he speculates that her song might be about some past sorrow, pain or loss of old, unhappy things' or

battles fought long ago. Or perhaps, he says, it is a humbler, simpler song about some present sorrow, pain, or loss, a 'matter of to-day.'

The poem ends as the speaker understands that whatever the girl sings about does not matter. It is the beauty of the song and her singing that touches his heart and lingers in his mind, giving him joy as he travels up the hill and carries her song with him long after he can no longer hear it.

Annotation (Reference to Context):

1) Stop here or gently pass!

Context: The above line is taken from the poem "The Solitary Reaper" composed by William Wordsworth. Wordsworth's poems are noted for their simplicity, humanity and adoration of nature. His poetry deals with the common folk from ordinary life. "Solitary Reaper" is a good example of such poetry.

Explanation: The poet hears the song sung by the girl. It is a sad song. The poet says to the passing people to either stop and listen the beautiful song sung by the girl or gently pass so that the girl should not be disturbed. He wants to enjoy the song as he finds the song very beautiful, though sad.

2) No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt

Context: Repeat as above

Explanation: In the above lines the poet has compared the singing of the girl to that of a Nightingale and a **Cuckoo bird**. He says that the song she sings is more welcome than any a nightingale might sing to weary travelers in the desert. It is like a soothing shade for these tired travellers.

3) Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Context: Repeat as above

Explanation: In the above lines the poet says that the sweet song of the solitary reaper girl is very sweet. He compares her song to that of Nightingale and Cuckoo. It is like a welcome note to the tired travellers. Her song breaks the silence of the sea which flows among the far away group of islands called Hebrides.

4) That has been, and may be again?

Context: Same as above

Explanation: This is the concluding line of the third stanza of the poem. The poet says that the song of the girl might be about some past sorrow, pain or loss of old, unhappy things or battles fought long ago. Or perhaps, he says, it may be about some natural

sorrow, loss or pain which she had or she may face in the future.

5) The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

Context: As above

Explanation: These lines are the concluding lines of the poem. The poet is not able to understand the song of the girl. But the beauty of the song and her singing **touches** his heart and **remains** in his mind, giving him joy as he travels up the hill. Her song is so beautiful that he carries her song with him even long after he can no longer hear it.
