The Solitary Reaper

POEM TEXT

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

Look at her, alone in the field, that Scottish Girl by herself over there. She is cutting the grain and singing to herself. Stop and listen to her or walk on quietly. She cuts and gathers the grain and sings a sad song. Listen: the deep valley is overflowing with her music.

No nightingale ever sang more soothing notes to tired groups of travelers as they rested at an oasis in the Arabian desert. The cuckoo-bird never sang with such an affecting voice in the spring, breaking the ocean's silence around the Scottish isles.

Won't anyone tell me what her song is about? Maybe she sings so sadly for old tragedies and ancient battles. Or maybe the song is humbler, about everyday things—the pains and sorrows that everyone endures.

Whatever she was singing about, the young woman sang as though her song would never end. I saw her singing while she worked, bending over to cut the wheat with a sickle. I listened to her without moving. And as I walked on, up a hill, I carried her music in my heart: and I still do, long after I stopped hearing it.

THEMES

ART AND COMMUNICATION

"The Solitary Reaper" is a poem about music: the song a Scottish girl sings as she cuts hay with a sickle. Though the poem's narrator cannot understand what the girl is actually singing about, the girl's song sticks with him, its melancholy beauty echoing in his head "long after" its sound has faded. In this way, the poem suggests the ability of art to transcend cultural boundaries and even language itself. Art, in the poem, can communicate feeling or emotion even in the absence of concrete understanding. And yet, at the same time, the poem also communicates a bit of uncertainty about whether poetry itself can offer this connection in the way that music can.

The speaker focuses on the transfixing power of the reaper's mysterious song. He describes her song in elegant and slightly hyperbolic terms: it fills the valley with sound, and she sings "as if her song could have no ending." He also invites readers to share in his wonder and pleasure, asking them to "Stop here" and "listen." Yet he can't actually *understand* the reaper's song, and even cries out, "Will no one tell me what she sings?" He is either too far away to make out the words or, more likely, the reaper is singing in Scots (the national language of Scotland, which is closely related to but different from English). He wonders whether she's singing about some ancient, epic battles or simply the "humble" and "familiar" sorrows of everyday life. In either case, the speaker draws pleasure from the girl's song despite not knowing its specifics. For the speaker, the power of the reaper's song transcends cultural and linguistic divisions, allowing the speaker to feel connected to this solitary

"Highland lass."

Since poets often refer to their own art as song, the reader may also take the speaker's reflection on the power of the reaper's song as a reflection on the power of poetry itself. In the poem's focus on music, the speaker suggests that poetry's power lies less in its content and more in its rhythm, its music: the sheer pleasure of musical language is a means of connection. Of course, this suggestion puts pressure on the musical qualities of the poem to deliver on this claim. Because the speaker makes this suggestion, the reader may therefore want to pay particular attention to the poem's form—that is, the way that it organizes language and tries to find music in it.

Careful attention paid to the poem's form reveals something interesting: the poem is actually full of musical conflict. The first four lines of each stanza are roughly a ballad, a low, popular form (and likely the form of the reaper's song); the next four lines approximate heroic couplets, a more prestigious form in the 18th century. In this way, the poem alternates between high and low forms; it seems almost at war with itself, unable to establish a solid, steady musical structure. This shifting of forms suggests that beneath its celebration of the reaper's song's capacity to transcend cultural boundaries, the poet remains in some way insecure about the capacities of *poetry* to do the same. The song simply creates the connection. The poem, to a degree, must work to do so. Thus even as the speaker appreciates the transcendent beauty of the reaper's song, and of art to transcend all boundaries to offer connection, he struggles to capture such beauty on the page.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Line 17
- Lines 25-32

THE LIMITS OF POETRY

Despite the power of the reaper's song, which creates a connection across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the speaker spends much of the poem trying, and failing, to find the language to describe her song. The poem thus stresses the distinction between the speaker and the girl, and between poetry and song: her song—and her life—remains beyond what his poem can represent. Indeed, it is possible to read the poem as being about the *failure* of poetry, or specifically of certain poetic language, to adequately describe this pure, unpretentious music. In this way, the poem implicitly calls for a new kind of poetry that could better capture the reaper's song.

The poem begins in the present tense: the speaker asks the reader to "behold" "Yon solitary Highland Lass!" It seems at first almost as though the speaker is out on a hike with someone and is trying to get their attention: "listen," the speaker commands at the end of the first stanza.

However, the fourth stanza shifts into the past tense: "The Maiden sang / As if her song could have no ending." The speaker is not in the valley, watching the girl. Rather, he is recalling a particularly beautiful memory. Her music, as he reveals in the poem's final lines, has haunted him, staying in his heart long after he actually heard it. He's trying to describe the song to someone who wasn't there and who didn't hear the lass's song with him. There's thus a struggle at the core of the poem as the speaker must find a way to represent her music in language.

He tries to do this formally: the first four lines of every stanza is in a modified form of the ballad, a form associated with popular songs in English and Scots. The lass is likely singing in this format herself, meaning the form of the poem suggests a kind of affinity between the speaker's own art and the lass's music. However, the second group of four lines in each stanza switches into rhymed iambic tetrameter couplets, a high, elevated form, distant from the low, popular ballad. Put another way, as the poem struggles to capture the girl's music in writing, it finds itself unable to do so by mirroring the formal simplicity of that music.

Further, the content of his poem suggests further difficulty inherent in trying to capture music in writing. In the poem's second stanza, for instance, the speaker tries out a number of traditional metaphors for song. He compares the lass to a nightingale and cuckoo bird. He employs the high diction traditional to poetic descriptions of strange, foreign beauty, invoking "Arabian sands" and "the farthest Hebrides." But in each case, he admits that the beauty of the lass's song exceeds these traditionally beautiful things. Her song transcends not only language, then, but also the resources of poetry—at least the traditional resources of poetic cliché. And in the third stanza, the speaker admits that he doesn't even know what the song is about: it could be about great battles—or it might be about heartbreak.

In two key regards, then, his poetry fails to meaningfully recreate the song he heard: he can't describe its beauty and he can't summarize its content. In a way, the poem is a document of its own failure. However, since the speaker has opened the possibility that he might be able to create a kind of sympathy between his art and the lass's song, the poem might also be understood as a call, or a manifesto: it subtly implies the need for a new kind of poetry, a new kind of poetic language better suited to the task of representing that beauty of the reaper's song than the traditional, clichéd language at its disposal.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

NATURE AND THE POET

Wordsworth was one of the leading figures of English Romanticism, an artistic and intellectual movement that swept across Europe at the end of the 18th century. In contrast to the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on scientific reason, Romanticism drew on feelings, often provoked by the solitary contemplation of nature. Wordsworth, for instance, described poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" "recollected in tranquility"; in other words, poetry is a calm recollection of intense emotion.

"The Solitary Reaper" is a clear example of Wordsworthian Romanticism, since its speaker reflects on a powerful experience of nature from a tranquil distance. Though he does not know what she's singing about, the speaker seems to ascribe to the reaper a sort of virtuousness and purity on the basis of her simpler existence and relative proximity to nature. The poem seems to subtly suggest the nobility and honesty of physical labor like that which this girl performs. In doing so, however, the poem reduces the reaper's participation in human history and politics.

The poem presents two sets of actions. On the one hand, the reaper "cuts and binds the grain / and sings a melancholy strain." On the other hand, the speaker and the reader "Behold" and "listen." There is thus an implicit distinction between the reaper and the speaker in terms of their relationships with nature: while the reaper works directly on it, the speaker observes it and her from a distance. She is a participant while he is a spectator.

The reaper is implied to be closer to a "natural" existence than the speaker. In the terms of Romantic thought, she is also therefore implied to be closer to the source of poetry itself, since poetry comes from nature. In "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," the Romantic poet and critic Friedrich Schiller argues that the poets of his time have lost their intimacy with nature. They observe it from a distance and long to recover their proximity to it, whereas early poets participated in it directly. The reaper seems almost a model of this direct participation.

As the speaker admires the reaper's proximity to nature, however, he reduces her participation in human history and politics. He treats the reaper as something to observe, to draw inspiration from, and something ultimately separate from his world and its concerns.

The poem was written at a time of political and economic upheaval, just after the French Revolution and in the midst of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. But in the poem, the reaper works with pre-industrial tools in a landscape unmarred by factories, mines, or railroads. Indeed, in stanza 3, as the speaker tries to imagine what the reaper might be singing about, he allows that she might be interested in politics—but only the politics of the past: battles and catastrophes that happened long ago. The reaper is thus sequestered from the present, from its political and economic struggles. In contemplating her song, the speaker transforms her into something like nature itself: beyond or outside of human history, apt for contemplation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 17-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!

The first four lines of "The Solitary Reaper" announce the poem's broad themes and introduce the reader to its formal technique. The poem begins with apostrophe: the speaker addresses the reader directly, commanding them to "behold" and "stop here." The poem is thus an invitation—an invitation to contemplation. The speaker asks the reader to stand and watch as a Scottish woman—a "Highland Lass"—cuts a field of wheat with a sickle. The speaker uses the present tense throughout these lines. As a result, the reader may feel that they are standing next to the speaker, observing the scene together as it unfolds, listening to the reaper's song. Notably, however, each of the speaker's addresses to the reader are separated from the rest of the line by a caesura: even as the speaker invites the reader into the poem, he marks the reader's distance from the scene he describes.

In these lines, the speaker does not tell the reader much about the lass's song—yet. But the form of his poem may give the reader some hints about the song itself. The first four lines of the poem closely approximate a stanza of a ballad. At the time that Wordsworth wrote "The Solitary Reaper," the ballad was a folk form, in wide use across the British Isles for popular songs and lowbrow verse. It was not a highly literary form like the sonnet or heroic couplets. Instead, ballads often used everyday language to tell unpretentious stories of everyday life and love in the countryside and cities. Further, ballads were often collaboratively authored: one anonymous poet adding a stanza, another rearranging the order of stanzas, a third deleting stanzas or changing the theme, or writing new words to the same melody. Scottish poetry also makes prominent use of the ballad, in print and in popular song. Indeed, it seems likely that the reaper's song was a ballad or a piece of music emerging from the ballad tradition.

Ballads had a standard rhyme scheme and meter—though, as a popular form, these standards were rarely strictly upheld in

practice. Traditionally, ballads rhyme in an ABCB pattern (the second and fourth lines rhyme, the first and third do not), with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. The first four lines of "The Solitary Reaper" follow this pattern—almost. They do rhyme ABCB; but the first *three* lines of the poem are in iambic tetrameter followed by a single line of iambic trimeter. This means that the first four lines of the poem follow the pattern of a ballad, but with an extra foot in line 2—a relatively minor deviation from the standards of a genre whose standards are already loose. The speaker here seems to be imitating the formal dynamics of the reaper's song, in a sense recreating the reaper's song for the reader.

The first stanza of the poem is heavily end-stopped; it is enjambed only in lines 1 and 7. This creates a slow, contemplative reading experience: the reader is encouraged by the end-stops to ponder each line, to dwell on them meditatively. But the speaker also employs a subtle pattern of assonance, particularly on an /i/ sound, to bind together the stanza and keep the reader moving through it.

LINES 5-8

Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues to use apostrophe, commanding the reader to "listen" to the reaper's song. As he does so, the speaker's subject begins to shift. In the first four lines, he had described the reaper's activities in general terms: she is reaping and she is singing. Here, he begins to describe the song itself—a project to which the speaker will dedicate most of the rest of the poem. As the speaker shifts focus, the actual labor that the reaper performs falls away. Though the speaker spends much of the poem trying—and failing—to describe the reaper's song, he tells the reader very little about the work she performs as she sings the song. The reader does not learn, for instance, what kind of grain she reaps (perhaps barley, which was widely grown in Scotland). Nor does the reader learn much about her relationship with the land she works on: she might be a hired laborer, a farmer's daughter, a widow who owns her own land. These questions are outside the speaker's interest; he focuses on the song itself with a kind of obsession.

Even so, the information that the speaker actually provides about the song is surprisingly scanty. The reader learns in these lines that the song is "melancholy"—sad—and that it is loud enough that the deep valley where she works ("the vale profound") is "overflowing with the sound." These are rather generic descriptions, uninformative. They emphasize the speaker's position relative to the song: he is observing it from a distance (and, as the reader learns later in the poem, that distance is partially cultural: he is a tourist in Scotland).

As if reinforcing this cultural and physical distance, the poem's form shifts in lines 5-8 away from the first four lines and their close approximation of a ballad's form, in both meter and rhyme scheme. In contrast to the ballad form of the first four lines, lines 5-8 fall into an elevated rhythm and rhyme scheme. The lines rhyme in a CCDD pattern and are all in iambic tetrameter, a structure that is a close approximation to heroic couplets—rhyming lines of iambic pentameter—a form that was widely used in the 18th century by learned, scholarly, upper class poets like Alexander Pope. Even though these couplets in the poem aren't quite heroic, they are still far from the humble, everyday tones of a ballad.

Though Wordsworth's speaker falls short of full heroic couplets—each line is a foot short of the full iambic pentameter required of heroic couplets—the rhythm of that elevated form would no doubt have echoed in the ears of his early readers, well schooled in Pope and his followers. (Moreover, iambic tetrameter couplets had, in Wordsworth's day, its own elevated pedigree: it is, for instance, the meter of Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress," one of the most famous of Renaissance poems). If the first four lines come close to but fall short of the ballad, the next four come close to but fall short of heroic couplets. It feels as though the poem cannot decide whether to affiliate itself with high, learned poetry or low popular verse and so alternates between the two, falling short of both.

LINES 9-12

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:

In stanzas 2 and 3 of "The Solitary Reaper," the speaker repeatedly attempts to describe the reaper's song for the reader—and consistently fails to do so. The speaker begins in stanza 2 by comparing her, metaphorically, to a nightingale that is singing to weary travelers in the Arabian desert. The nightingale is an important bird in the history of poetry: it often serves as a symbol for the poet, its beautiful song standing in for beauty of poetry itself. (And Arabia is a suggestive location for the nightingale: for an English reader of the early 19th century, it would be a distant and exotic locale).

So in lines 9-13, the speaker is measuring the reaper's song against a traditional symbol of poetic beauty and power. And, in a sense, the speaker is also measuring the reaper's song against the tradition of poetry itself: as a prominent symbol of poetry's power and as itself a traditional symbol, the nightingale stands in for the traditions of poetry. Further, metaphor is one of the central poetic devices in the history of poetry. After refraining from using it in the first stanza, the speaker does so repeatedly in the second. The reader may suspect, then, that the speaker is testing metaphor itself, measuring the ability of traditional

metaphoric comparisons to describe the reaper's actual song.

As it turns out, the speaker states that the metaphor is not strong enough, and that "No Nightingale did ever chaunt" as beautifully as the reaper sang. In this respect, the speaker offers the reaper an elegant and moving compliment: as beautiful as the nightingale's song may be, her song is more beautiful, more moving. As he does so, he also offers an implicit critique of poetry and its historical resources. If the nightingale is a symbol for the poet, then the reaper sings more beautifully than any poet ever did. If the nightingale is a symbol for the historical resources of poetry, then the beauty of her song exceeds those resources, marks their limitations. The poem seems to be asserting that poetry does not have a symbol or metaphor in its repertoire that *can* express the beauty of the reaper's song. The speaker thus resorts to negation. He can only say that the reaper's song is *more* beautiful than a nightingale's song; he cannot actually describe or capture the actual character or degree of the beauty of the reaper's song.

In keeping with the first stanza's uncomfortable mix of high and low literary forms, these four lines are themselves complicated and confused. The speaker returns to the pseudo-ballad form of lines 1-4: like those lines, the first three lines of stanza two are in iambic tetrameter; line 12 is in iambic trimeter. The rhyme scheme has shifted slightly, from ABCB to ABAB, which is just a minor disruption of the standard ballad form. However, after a relatively restrained first stanza, the speaker indulges in gaudy, loud alliterations here, such as the alliteration on /n/ in line 9. With these alliterations, the lines become self-consciously literary (perhaps even pretentious). The result is a mismatch of form and content: in place of the polished, refined form the reader might expect for a poet employing a traditional symbol of poetic beauty, Wordsworth's speaker uses a popular, folk form. The conflict between the high and low which characterized the two halves of the first stanza has thus migrated inside of lines 9-12.

LINES 13-16

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.

In lines 13-16, the speaker continues to search for adequate language to describe the beauty of the reaper's song. He has tried comparing the song to a nightingale in lines 9-12, but he finds her song more beautiful than any nightingale's song. In these lines he tries a new metaphor, comparing her voice to that of another bird, the cuckoo. He also locates the cuckoo in a very different geographical place from the nightingale. Where the nightingale sings to exhausted travelers in the Arabian desert, the cuckoo sings in "the farthest Hebrides"—a group of islands off the northern coast of Scotland. The two environments are roughly opposites. The Arabian desert is a dry, equatorial landscape. The Hebrides are an aquatic, sub-arctic seascape. Between the two comparisons, then, the speaker encompasses much of the known world and its possibilities. Once again, however, he finds the reaper's song more beautiful—more "thrilling"—than the cuckoo's. Across this great swath of the world, from the Arabian desert to the arctic ocean, there is no available metaphor with a voice more beautiful than the reaper's.

The cuckoo is a less heavily meaningful bird in the tradition of western literature than the cuckoo is. The cuckoo is not, for instance, used as a symbol for poetry itself. That said, the cuckoo does appear regularly in Western literature and myth. For example, the Greek god Zeus adopts the form of a cuckoo to seduce Hera before their marriage. So, with this comparison to a cuckoo's voice, the once again speaker tries to measure the reaper's song with an allusion to an important tradition in western culture. And, once again, the reaper's song exceeds that symbol, as the speaker notes that the cuckoo's voice was "ne'er" "so thrilling" as the reaper's song. As with the comparison to the nightingale, the speaker seems to be insisting on the inability of the poetic symbols at his disposal to adequately describe the reaper's singing, and to more broadly be insisting that metaphor as tool fails to describe her song adequately. Once again, he is forced to describe her song through negation: he cannot say what it sounds like, he can only say that it is more "thrilling" than something else.

As in the first stanza of the poem, the poem's form shifts in this second half of the second stanza, moving from an approximation of a ballad to an approximation of heroic couplets. The shift in form seems significant in this stanza: *neither* in a ballad *nor* in an elevated, learned form can the speaker describe the reaper's song. All his resources as a poet fail him.

The stanza is also highly enjambed: only lines 4 and 16 are end-stopped. After the contemplative, slow-moving first stanza, the speaker seems to encourage the reader to speed through these lines—fittingly, since these lines fail to describe the reaper. These lines thus take on the sense of a kind of frenzied, failed attempt, with the fact of the failed attempt weighing more importantly than the precise content of those attempts. The stanza also thus issues an implicit challenge: to develop new poetic resources that might do better, that could actually describe the beauty of the reaper's song.

LINES 17-20

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:

In stanza 2, the speaker tries to describe the beauty of the reaper's song—a task he finds difficult, if not impossible, with the poetic resources at his disposal. In stanza 3, he switches

tactics and tries to describe what she sings about: the content of her song. However, as he admits in line 17, he does not understand the reaper's song: he asks for someone to explain it to him. The reason for his incomprehension are not immediately clear. He may simply be too far away to make out the words, with only the melody carrying down to him across the fields. More likely, she is singing in Scots, the national language of Scotland at the time. Though Scots is similar to English in many ways, it is a separate language, a language that Wordsworth didn't know.

Since the speaker can't understand what the reaper sings, he begins to speculate. In lines 18-20, he advances one possibility: she is singing a sad song ("plaintive numbers") in memory of ancient tragedies: battles and political disasters that affected her ancestors, but not her. In contrast to the specific allusions in stanza 2—to the nightingale and the cuckoo—this is an allusion to a broad tradition of heroic poetry, such as epics like the Iliad, concerned with grand deeds and struggles. This is an instructive moment. Though the speaker imagines that the reaper might be concerned with politics, it is the politics of the past. In the speaker's mind, she is disconnected from the political struggles of the present—which, with the French Revolution having occurred in the recent past and Napoleon rising to power in France, were considerable, and directly affected working people in the rural parts of England and Scotland. The speaker, then, in observing this woman in the rural countryside, imagines her in a kind of nostalgic way. He sees her as living in or connected to a lost past, and disconnected from the present.

As the speaker indulges in this fantasy about the contents of the reaper's song, he switches back into an approximation of a ballad—three lines of iambic tetrameter followed by a line of iambic trimeter, rhymed ABAB. By now this is the expected move in the poem. The poem has found a kind of equilibrium, a consistent pattern that emerges from its continuing internal conflicts over the proper form in which to describe the reaper's song.

LINES 21-24

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?

In lines 21-24, the speaker continues the work of the previous lines: trying to guess the content of the reaper's song. In lines 17-20, he speculated that it might concern the great battles and political tragedies of the past. In lines 21-4, he offers a new option: instead of being concerned with grand, historical catastrophes, she is singing about things closer to home, matters of the heart and family. In contrast to the great tragedies of history—singular, monumental events—these "humble" "familiar matter[s]" reoccur over and over again: they have been "and may be again," the speaker notes. They are the constants of human life, things that don't get recorded by history, but nonetheless transcend history because they affect so many different people in so many different historical situations. The speaker thus draws an implicit opposition between the personal and the political, matters of heart and matters of state—and he projects that opposition on to the reaper's song.

Where stanza 2 wrestles with the capacity of poetry to adequately reproduce the reaper's song, stanza 3 seems to accept the speaker's inability to do so. He now positions himself on the outside of the reaper's song, an observer attempting to make sense of it. This emphasizes the distance between the reaper's art and the speaker's poetry: they have separate subjects, separate languages, though perhaps they share some of the same pains.

The end of this stanza follows the pattern established in previous stanzas, switching in its final four lines into a set of continuous iambic tetrameter couplets rhymed CCDD. Once again, there is some tension between the form of the poem and its contents: in this elegant and elevated form, the speaker describes humble, everyday sorrows—the kind of pain that might be better suited for a ballad. Meanwhile, in the previous half of the stanza (lines 17-20) in which he describes high, heroic events, he uses the ballad—though those events would traditionally be reserved for heroic couplets or blank verse. The poem's form continues to be a site of struggle and conflict, the speaker (and the poet) wrestling to find the language and form appropriate to his subject.

LINES 25-32

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.

The first stanza of "The Solitary Reaper" introduces the reader to the scene at the center of the poem: a solitary Scottish woman, cutting grain and singing. The second and third stanzas try—and mostly fail—to describe her song. In these two stanzas, in order to arrive at any kind of description, the speaker is forced to rely on negation and speculation—he's never able to directly or clearly capture the actual nature of the song. In the final stanza, the speaker retreats, returning to the work of the first stanza. He describes the scene for the reader once more: "I saw her singing at her work / And o'er the sickle bending." And he once again describes her song, in broad general terms: "the Maiden sang / as if her song could have no ending." Indeed, he seems to have given up on offering any rich description of

the song. Instead, using polyptoton, he describes the song mainly by repeating words related to "song" insistently: "sang," "song," and "singing." (Note that this repetition in the final stanza is actually an intensification of the similar repetition of "singing" and "sings" in the first stanza. While that repetition may have passed unnoticed, this one announces itself forcefully).

However, something important has changed between the first and fourth stanzas: the speaker is suddenly using the past tense to describe the scene. He is no longer speaking to the reader as though they might look over their shoulder and see the reaper at work. Instead, he confesses that he is describing an event that has already taken place, potentially some time ago and at some distance from where he is at the time of writing this poem. In the final four lines of the poem, the speaker confesses that the poem actually narrates a memory, noting that the reaper's song haunted him as he walked the hill out of the valley where she was working—and continued to haunt him long after. The final stanza thus complicates some of the poem's questions. On a first read, for instance, stanza 2 may seem to be largely about whether the traditions of poetry are adequate to the task of describing the reaper's song.

On a second read, this question is complicated, though not altogether displaced: one must now consider the role of memory in constructing poetry. Wordsworth famously once wrote that poetry emerges from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" "recollected in tranquility." "The Solitary Reaper" answers precisely to this definition of poetry: it describes a powerful and emotive scene—but it reflects on that scene from a tranquil distance, the poet processing his experience after it has happened. The poem is thus, in a sense, a reflection on poetry itself as Wordsworth understands it. The poet is meditating throughout the poem on the capacities of his own art, and its capacity to capture the powerful experiences he understands to be at its core. And he seems ultimately undecided, ambivalent about whether the poem truly can capture those experiences. The poem ends with a lingering melancholy, with the reaper's song never fully described to the reader, and remaining as something only private to the speaker, existing only "in my heart." The poem, and poetry more broadly, can capture not the song itself but only the way it has affected the speaker.

The conflict between the speaker's goals for the poem and what the poem is actually able to achieve is expressed throughout the poem in the poem's form. That conflict continues in the fourth stanza, which follows the mixed pattern of stanza 1: rhymed ABCBDDEE, with three lines of iambic tetrameter, a line of iambic trimeter, and then four more lines of iambic tetrameter. This stanza, as with the three previous stanzas, can be divided in half: the first half a kind of ballad stanza, followed by something like heroic couplets, two very different forms with very different cultural associations. That the poet switches between them repeatedly in the same poem suggests that neither quite accomplishes what he hopes to. Instead, he is left with some lingering feeling of complication, failure—and an implicit desire for a different, better set of poetic resources to be able to communicate what, so far, he has failed to capture and exists only in his heart.

SYMBOLS

NIGHTINGALE

The nightingale is a small, migratory bird native to England. (It winters in sub-Saharan Africa, not Arabia, as the speaker suggests). It is known for its loud and beautiful song—which it often sings at night. It is often invoked by poets. Indeed, it often serves as a symbol for poets themselves: perhaps flattering themselves, they compare their own song to a beautiful bird's warbling. More broadly, the bird is associated with creativity and inspiration, with mourning and passionate speech. This tradition stretches to classical poetry. The Latin poet Virgil compares Orpheus' mourning, after he loses Eurydice to the "lament of the nightingale." In Renaissance English poetry too, the nightingale is frequently invoked. Using a classical name for the nightingale, Philomel, Shakespeare mentions the bird in Sonnet 102:

> Our love was new, and then but in the spring,
> When I was wont to greet it with my lays;
> As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
> And stops his pipe in growth of riper days...

Romantic poets like Wordsworth drew upon and expanded this tradition. For them, the nightingale was not simply a symbol for the poet; the bird also served as a symbol for a creativity that exceeds and challenges human power, something just out of reach to which a poet might aspire. The bird's invocation in stanza two of "The Solitary Reaper" is thus complex and historically rich. It is, on the one, hand a high compliment: the speaker suggests that the reaper's song is more beautiful than the song of a bird whose song was proverbially beautiful. On the other hand, the speaker's compliment engages with the history of poetry, a long tradition of poets who compare themselves to the nightingale to valorize their art. That tradition falls short in this case: it does not adequately describe the reaper's song. Through the speaker's specific use of this symbol, then, the poem subtly suggests that the tradition itself needs to be reevaluated and revised.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Nightingale"

CUCKOO-BIRD

The cuckoo is a family of birds, which includes several common European songbirds. Like the nightingale, they are known for the beauty of their singing. Unlike the nightingale, they do not migrate—so they are present from the very earliest weeks of the spring. And, fittingly, they are solitary birds, like the reaper herself.

While the above characteristics are probably the primary reasons the speaker uses the bird to describe the solitary reaper, the cuckoo is also widely invoked in European mythology and literature. For example, in Greek mythology, Zeus transforms himself into a cuckoo to seduce Hera, prior to their marriage. As with his use of the nightingale, then, the speaker offers an elegant and complicated compliment to the reaper when he compares her to a cuckoo bird. On the one hand, her song is like a beautiful bird's song. On the other hand, her song is measured against a tradition in European literature.

And yet, as with the nightingale, the speaker asserts that the cuckoo's song is in fact *less* beautiful than the reaper's. In other words, the speaker finds this entire poetic tradition—and this specific comparison—insufficient to the beauty of her song. That the girl's song is too beautiful to be captured by this traditional symbol, suggests that new traditions, new forms of comparison, are thus necessary to adequately describe her song.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "Cuckoo-bird"

ARABIA AND THE HEBRIDES

Arabia is a historical region of the mid-east, comprising present-day Saudi Arabia and surrounding regions. Romantic poets and painters often invoke it in their work, using it as a symbol for distant and exotic lands. Further, they often eroticize the Middle East, emphasizing the sensual pleasures of life there. Wordsworth, though, takes a slightly different tack: emphasizing instead the climate, its desert terrain, and the difficulty of traveling across it—as many traders and merchants did during the period. Nonetheless, it remains an exotic and distant locale for an English readership of the 19th century.

Arabia, though, is almost the opposite of the Hebrides, which are mentioned in line 16. Where Arabia is a hot arid climate, the Hebrides, a chain of islands north of Scotland, are maritime and cold. Where Arabia is distant and exotic, the Hebrides are much closer to home. Between the two locales, then, the speaker spans the whole world: suggesting that nowhere in the world can one find a more beautiful singer than the reaper, and, further, that there is no traditional poetic metaphor that is up to the task of capturing the full beauty of the song.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Arabian"
- **Line 16:** "Hebrides"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

In the first stanza of "The Solitary Reaper," the speaker directly addresses the reader and issues a set of instructions for the reader: "Behold her," "Stop here, or gently pass!" "O listen!" This instances of direct address are examples of apostrophe.

However, this use of apostrophe is, in a sense, deceptive. The apostrophe gives the reader a sense of immediacy and intimacy. It feels as though the speaker and the reader are walking down a Scottish road together; as though the reader might look over their shoulder and see the reaper at work. However, as the speaker reveals in stanza 4, through his use of the past tense, the poem is based on a memory: the speaker is describing a particularly beautiful and haunting memory from his trip to Scotland, not something immediate and present before his eyes. For the first three stanzas, in part because of the use of the apostrophe, the reader believes they are in the present, walking with the speaker. In the fourth stanza, the floor falls away and the speaker reveals that they are actually in the past. The use of apostrophe thus contributes to the power of the memory: it is so haunting that it seems to seep into, to become part of the present.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Behold her"
- **Line 4:** "Stop here, or gently pass! "
- **Line 7:** "O listen!"

ENJAMBMENT

"The Solitary Reaper" uses enjambment and end-stop in a relatively casual fashion. There is no clear pattern to the poem's enjambments; it does not correspond to the rhyme scheme's internal units of couplets and quatrains. Rather, it is employed rhetorically, where and when it proves useful to the speaker's attempt to describe the reaper's song. Thus, in some stanzas, the poem employs enjambment sparsely, while in others, most of the lines are enjambed. For instance, the first stanza has two enjambments, in the first and seventh line. The rest of the stanza is end-stopped (though these end-stops have varying degrees of force; for instance, line 5 is a relatively weak end-stop and could be read as an enjambment, while line 4 is a very strong end-stop). This gives the stanza a slow, meditative quality. The reader is encouraged to pause over each line and contemplate it. It feels almost as though the end-stops compel

the reader to stop and stand with the speaker, listening to the reaper's song. The two enjambments bracket this contemplative stanza, easing the reader into and out of it, without disrupting its meditative mood.

By contrast, the poem's next stanza is heavily enjambed, with only two end-stops, in lines 12 and 16. These end-stops serve to conclude and punctuate the stanzas two attempts to describe the reaper's song: they mark the end of the speaker's extended comparisons of the reaper's song, first to a "Nightingale" and then to a "Cuckoo-bird." *Within* each of these extended comparisons, however, *all* of the lines are enjambed. Especially after the contemplative first stanza, these enjambments make stanza 2 feel fast. It cascades down the page in a pulse of poetic energy. Instead of asking the reader to contemplate each line, the poem compels the reader to sprint down the page. This is perhaps fitting: each of the speaker's comparisons fail, as the speaker himself states that they cannot match the actual beauty of the song. There is no reason to dwell on the details of the comparison, since none of them actually describe the reaper's song. They describe, instead, what it isn't.

"The Solitary Reaper" thus uses enjambment and end-stop to speed up and slow down the poem, emphasizing moments that deserve contemplation and de-emphasizing the moments that the reader ought to speed past.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "field / , / Yon"
- **Lines 7-8:** "profound / / Is"
- **Lines 9-10:** "chaunt / / More"
- **Lines 10-11:** "bands / / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "haunt / , / Among"
- **Lines 13-14:** "heard / In"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Cuckoo-bird / , / Breaking"
- **Lines 15-16:** "seas / / Among"
- **Lines 18-19:** "flow / For"
- **Lines 19-20:** "things / , / And"
- **Lines 21-22:** "lay / , / Familiar"
- **Lines 23-24:** "pain / , / That"
- **Lines 25-26:** "sang / / As"
- **Lines 27-28:** "work / , / And"
- **Lines 30-31:** "hill / , / The"
- **Lines 31-32:** "bore / , / Long"

END-STOPPED LINE

Each stanza of "The Solitary Reaper" may be divided in half: with the first four lines functioning like a ballad and the second four like an abbreviated set of heroic couplets. Conceptually too, each stanza often neatly divides in two. For example, in stanza 3, the speaker proposes one possibility about the contents of the reaper's song in lines 17-20—she is singing about "old, unhappy, far-off things"—and a second, different possibility in lines 22-24: it is "some more humble lay." These units are often marked with end-stops: thare are end-stops in the fourth and eighth lines of the stanza. These end-stops help to underscore the conceptual and formal organization of the poem, guiding the reader to think about, for example, the formal discrepancies in the organization of the first and second half of the stanza, the way the poem employs separate formal schemes in each half.

Beyond this underlying formal and conceptual architecture, however, the use of enjambment and end-stop is variable. The speaker uses it to slow the poem down, inviting the reader to linger and contemplate some particularly poignant and important details—as in the heavily end-stopped first stanza. Or he withholds end-stop, as in the relatively enjambed second and third stanzas, which spill down the page, at considerable velocity—fittingly, since they contain a series of failed comparisons and speculative possibilities, hardly the kind of thing the poem wants a reader to linger on and contemplate in detail. End-stop thus serves to control, regulate, and mark the poem's conceptual and formal structure. And the speaker sometimes withholds it as a way of accelerating the reader's experience of the poem, pushing them through the poem's failed experiments, so that the emphasis falls on the failures themselves, rather than their details.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Lass"
- **Line 3:** "herself"
- **Line 4:** "pass"
- **Line 5:** "grain"
- **Line 6:** "strain"
- **Line 8:** "sound"
- **Line 12:** "sands"
- **Line 16:** "Hebrides"
- **Line 17:** "sings"
- **Line 20:** "ago"
- **Line 22:** "to-day"
- **Line 24:** "again"
- **Line 25:** "sang"
- **Line 28:** " bending"
- **Line 29:** "still"
- **Line 32:** "more"

CAESURA

"The Solitary Reaper" mostly uses caesura in the first and fourth stanza. Some of these uses are relatively unremarkable: they serve to punctuate the poem and divide up its ideas. For instance, there is a caesura in line 24: "That has been, and may be again?" The break in the middle of the line serves to emphasize the conceptual break between past and future: though the sorrow (and the songs that come from them) may be the same, they are separate moments, affecting distinct

people. Here the caesura serves to strengthen the poem's rhetorical gestures and underline its ideas.

Caesura also serves in the poem to mark the separation between the reader and the world of the poem. In the first stanza, the speaker directly addresses the reader: "Behold her," "Stop here, or gently pass!" "O listen." Each of these lines contains a caesura (and in the case of line 4 a caesura and an end-stop). These pauses mark the reader's distance from the scene being described: they isolate and separate the language directed toward the reader from the rest of the poem's language. In the poem's final stanza, the speaker closely repeats the first stanza's language: "O listen" becomes "I listened, motionless and still." Here, the separation pertains to the speaker rather than the reader: once he admits that the poem emerges from a memory, he too is separated, grammatically and temporally, from the world of the poem.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "her, single"
- **Line 4:** "here, or "
- **Line 7:** "listen! for"
- **Line 24:** "been, and"
- **Line 25:** "theme, the "
- **Line 29:** "listened, motionless"

ALLUSION

"The Solitary Reaper" contains a number of allusions to important poetic traditions. Some of these allusions are direct and specific; some of them are general and thematic. In stanza 2, for example, the speaker compares the reaper's song to a "nightingale's"—and states that the girl sings more beautifully than the bird. This is a specific allusion to an important symbol in the history of western poetry. Beginning as early as the ancient Greeks, the nightingale served as a symbol for poetry itself—in part because of the beauty of the bird's song. To compare the reaper to the nightingale is thus to measure her against poetry itself, its history, its traditional resources. This specific allusion thus allows the speaker to make a more general claim: not only is her song more beautiful than a nightingale's, it also exceeds the resources and the beauty of poetry itself—it is somehow beyond poetry, at least as the speaker understands it.

By contrast in stanza 3, the speaker makes a much more general allusion, pondering whether the reaper's song might engage with "old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago." The reader may take this as an allusion to several important traditions in poetry: for example, the epic, a kind of long poem that often deals with heroes, battles, and political catastrophe. The speaker does not reference a particular epic—say, the *Iliad*—but rather ponders whether the reaper might be engaging with the tradition of such writing more broadly. In both cases, however, the speaker uses allusion to measure the extent of the reaper's engagement with and her relation to poetry itself: its history and its traditions.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Nightingale"
- **Line 14:** "Cuckoo-bird"
- **Lines 19-20:** "old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago: "

METAPHOR

"The Solitary Reaper" is resolutely unmetaphorical. In keeping with Wordsworth's poetic maxim: to use "the language really used by men," he avoids flowery, elaborate metaphors: the poem is frequently direct, concrete, and simple. The major exception falls in stanza 2, where the speaker compares the reaper's song first to a nightingale's "chaunt" and then to a cuckoo's "voice." In contrast to the direct simplicity of the rest of the poem, these metaphors feel *poetic*: they are elaborate, and embroidered with esoteric geographical references to Arabia and the Hebrides. They take the reader out of the world of the poem; they make the reader think about far-flung things, distant from the reaper's simple song.

The metaphors, in fact, feel off, out of keeping with the rest of the poem—and intentionally so. In lines 9 and 13, the speaker makes clear that these metaphors *fail* to describe the reaper's song: "No Nightingale did ever chaunt"; "A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard." The metaphors try to capture the beauty of the reaper's song—and they fail. This failure may be more broadly instructive: the speaker may be suggesting here that metaphor itself, as it has been traditionally used in the English poetic tradition, is not sufficient: it does not have any purchase on reality outside of poetry. The speaker uses metaphor, then, to stage his frustration with the device, and to issue an implicit call for a different kind of poetry, that employs "the language really used by men"—and can describe the lives they lead.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-16:** "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. "

ALLITERATION

"The Solitary Reaper" is a poem about music—a poem that tries to describe the effect of music, the way particularly beautiful music haunts the people long after they've heard it. The poem struggles to do so: it finds traditional poetic techniques like metaphor insufficient to describe the reaper's song. However, the speaker finds more success in less flashy devices like

alliteration. The poem's use of alliteration is subtle and quiet: one might miss it on an initial reading. For instance, in the final stanza, the speaker employs a repeated /i/ sound, which braids the passage together:

> 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.

After the initial line frames the stanza, the /i/ sound—sometimes as alliteration, sometimes as assonance—binds the rest of it together, linking together a set of lines that are otherwise not highly musical. (There is a secondary and less significant alliteration on the /s/ sound, which largely depends on polyptoton: the repetition of words derived from *sing*). The alliteration creates a thread of music. It suggests that, whatever the speaker's frustration with poetry and its capacity to represent music, his art contains a reservoir of musical possibility, a possibility that pushes past just *representing* music to actually *being* music.

Such subtle alliterations can be found throughout the poem, one of its quiet, constant resources. These threads of musical alliteration should be contrasted with the flashy, chiming alliterations the reader finds in stanza 2: for instance, "No Nightingale" and "welcome notes to weary bands." In contrast to the soft, whispering alliteration on the /i/ sound in stanza four, these alliterations are loud, prominent. They call attention to themselves—not necessarily in a good way. They may, in fact, seem cheap, gaudy, over-the-top. They manifest a different kind of poetic music: a music that drowns out the thing it describes, being so entranced with its own sonic capacities. The speaker uses alliteration here to reinforce the failure of the metaphors he uses in stanza 2. Not only do the metaphors fail, they fail spectacularly, chiming and ringing with false grandeur.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “s”
- **Line 2:** “s”
- **Line 3:** “s,” “h”
- **Line 4:** “S,” “h”
- **Line 5:** “s”
- **Line 6:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 8:** “s”
- **Line 9:** “N,” “N”
- **Line 10:** “n”
- **Line 12:** “A,” “A”
- **Line 13:** “A,” “s,” “n”
- **Line 14:** “s”
- **Line 15:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 16:** “A”
- **Line 17:** “W,” “n,” “w,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 18:** “P,” “p,” “n,” “f”
- **Line 19:** “f”
- **Line 21:** “m”
- **Line 22:** “m”
- **Line 23:** “S,” “s”
- **Line 24:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 25:** “s”
- **Line 26:** “s”
- **Line 27:** “s”
- **Line 28:** “s”
- **Line 29:** “m,” “s”
- **Line 30:** “m”
- **Line 31:** “m”

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, "The Solitary Reaper" often uses assonance to bind together his lines, creating musical threads that extend down his long stanzas. For example, in the first stanza, a repeated /i/ sound creates momentum and connection across the 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.

The /i/ sound flutters between being assonance and alliteration. As it does so, it helps the reader to read down a highly end-stopped stanza. Where the end-stops create an incentive for the reader to pause, to contemplate, the assonance helps bind together the stanza's otherwise disparate thoughts, supplying a kind of glue for the reader. In this way, it mimics the endless, boundless quality of the reaper's song ("the Maiden sang / As if her song could have no ending").

Assonance thus provides the speaker with a *structural* resource, something to bind together his poem. At the same time, it also offers a *poetic* resource: it allows him to imitate the reaper's song, and to do it better than flashier poetic devices, like metaphor, otherwise allow.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “e,” “e,” “i,” “i”

- **Line 2:** “i,” “i,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 3:** “ea,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “e”
- **Line 4:** “a”
- **Line 5:** “ai”
- **Line 6:** “i,” “ai”
- **Line 7:** “i”
- **Line 8:** “I,” “i”
- **Line 9:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 10:** “e,” “ea,” “a”
- **Line 11:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 12:** “A,” “A,” “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 13:** “A,” “a”
- **Line 14:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 15:** “ea,” “i,” “i,” “ea”
- **Line 16:** “e,” “i,” “e”
- **Line 17:** “i,” “o,” “o,” “i”
- **Line 18:** “a,” “i,” “o”
- **Line 19:** “o,” “a,” “i”
- **Line 20:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 21:** “i,” “i,” “o,” “o,” “ay”
- **Line 22:** “i,” “i,” “a,” “a,” “ay”
- **Line 23:** “o,” “a,” “a,” “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 24:** “a,” “a,” “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 25:** “a,” “e,” “e,” “e,” “e,” “a”
- **Line 26:** “i,” “o,” “o,” “i”
- **Line 27:** “I,” “a,” “a,” “o”
- **Line 28:** “A,” “i”
- **Line 29:** “I,” “i,” “o,” “i”
- **Line 30:** “I,” “i”
- **Line 31:** “i,” “i,” “I,” “o”
- **Line 32:** “i,” “o,” “o”

POLYPTOTON

In "The Solitary Reaper", the speaker tries repeatedly to describe the reaper's song, guessing at what it might be about, trying to compare it to traditional symbols of poetic beauty and power. He is consistently frustrated, though: he suggests throughout the poem that the traditional resources of poetry are incapable of describing a song at once so beautiful and so humble. It may be a measure of his frustration, then, that the poem consistently employs polyptoton to describe the reaper's song. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker repeats variations on the word *sing*:

> 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...

He does the much the same thing in stanza 4, albeit with more intensity—as though his failed attempts to describe the reaper's song have increased the urgency of his need for polyptoton:

> 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...

In the poem's thirty-two lines, the speaker uses four distinct versions of the word *sing*, for a total of six instances. This is a highly repetitive use of a single word and its derivatives in a poem that is otherwise capable of impressive variation in its diction. The repetition serves as a measure of the speaker's frustration. He cannot find a way to describe the reaper's song, so he resorts to the simplest, most functional word for it, varying that word as needed. The repetition is not so much a sign of linguistic virtuosity. Rather, it is a sign of linguistic frustration: the feeling that more sophisticated resources have failed.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “singing”
- **Line 6:** “sings”
- **Line 17:** “sings”
- **Line 25:** “sang”
- **Line 26:** “song”
- **Line 27:** “singing”

VOCABULARY

Highland (Line 2) - The Highlands are a mountainous region in the northwest of Scotland. Because of its many mountain ranges, the area is scarcely populated—and is known instead for its natural beauty. It includes the Hebrides, a chain of Islands off the northern coast of Ireland. It was traditionally a Gaelic speaking region of Scotland, though by Wordsworth's time the predominant language in the region was Scots—albeit a form of the language strongly influenced by Gaelic. Despite its geographic isolation, the region was bound culturally and economically to the rest of the British Isles, trading in black cattle and whiskey, and exporting its distinctive tartan-pattern kilts, which became a fashion craze in the 1820s across Europe.

Lass (Line 2) - A girl, usually young or unmarried. The word was widely used in regional English dialects, particularly the dialects of the North and Midlands of England. In the dialect spoken around London—the dialect that eventually became dominant—the word was not used. As a result, even in Wordsworth's time, it likely sounded archaic and regional, a mark of backwardness. In Scottish dialects, the word had a more specific application: it often meant a serving-girl. It is

unclear whether Wordsworth intends the word simply as an archaic regionalism, or whether he uses it in its specifically Scottish sense.

Reaping (Line 3) - The act of cutting wheat, barley, or another grain. For much of human history, the activity was done by hand, using a sharp tool like a sickle or a scythe. It usually occurs in the autumn, when the grain has fully matured. It marks a major occurrence on the calendar of agricultural communities and the end of reaping was often the occasion for major festivals and celebrations. The word often took on a metaphorical significance as well, with the reaping of grain serving as a symbol for the reaping of souls, of human lives. Hence, for instance, Death is often represented as a reaper. Wordsworth seems uninterested in this metaphorical senses: he focuses instead on the physical act of reaping—and the singing that accompanies it.

Strain (Line 6) - A melody or tune. It generally refers to a recognizable passage in a well-known piece of music: some famous melody that most people know. However, it can also refer to a passage of poetry. Though the musical sense is clearly the primary one in this passage, the word's capacity to refer to poetry may strengthen the reader's sense that this poem, through its meditation on the reaper's song, is also reflecting on poetry itself.

Vale (Line 7) - A valley. The word is typically reserved for wide valleys: that is, valleys that are particularly suitable for agriculture because they contain a lot of flat land.The word is also used to refer to the world, the scene of life itself. In this usage, the world is often described as a place of suffering and sorrow: it is called "the vale of tears." For instance, the poet Percy Shelley, a younger contemporary of Wordsworth's writes in one poem, "Why dost thou pass away and leave our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?" In describing the reaper's home as a vale, Wordsworth may be drawing on both senses at once: locating her in a specific geographical place and, at the same time, placing her in the general context of human suffering and struggle.

Profound (Line 7) - Deep. Though contemporary speakers generally use the word in a metaphoric sense, to refer to something complex or sophisticated, Wordsworth here uses the term literally: the vale or valley is surrounded by high mountains, which adds to its sense of isolation, distance from the rest of the world.

Nightingale (Line 9) - A migratory songbird, common in England and Europe. The bird's song is proverbially beautiful. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, it has been employed as a symbol for poetry—and often serves more broadly as a symbol for passionate and inspired speech, for mourning, and for love. For instance, Virgil compares Orpheus' mourning "lament of the nightingale." Because of its prestige in classical poetry, the symbol was taken up by the poets of the English Renaissance. By Wordsworth's time it was thus approaching the status of a cliché. Comparing the reaper to a nightingale, the speaker thus compares her to poetry itself (and, implicitly, its traditions, its history), finding her song more beautiful and more soothing.

Bands (Line 10) - Groups or tribes. The word generally refers to a small group of nomadic people who travel together. Here, most likely, it refers to a group of merchants or traders, since the Arabian desert was at the center of the land routes that linked Asian and European markets. The word is slightly archaic, and would've been for Wordsworth too. The sense is thus of some ancient and exotic scene, far from the Scottish highlands the speaker describes elsewhere in the poem.

Haunt (Line 11) - A place where someone usually or habitually hangs out. The word is often used for animals, to describe their dens or nests. In this instance, the haunt may be occupied either by the nightingale or by the travelers (or both): it could be a nest somewhere in the desert, or it might be an oasis, a common stopping place where travelers refresh themselves and water their camels before continuing their journey. In either case, the word suggests intimacy and comfort, a sense of safety and familiarity.

Arabian (Line 12) - Arabia is a peninsula in the middle east, which encompasses modern day Saudi Arabia, among other nations. (Historically it was divided into four regions geographically). It is the center of Islam, and contains the religion's holy city, Mecca. It was also an important site of trade routes that crossed through the Arabian deserts carrying goods to and from Asia and Europe. It has thus often served as a meeting point for cultures.For a poet of Wordsworth's era, however, it was likely simply a symbol of a distant and exotic culture. He was unlikely to have known much about its religious or cultural history—and neither would his readers. In this sense, it is less important to the poem in terms of its specific and rich identity. It matters more to the poem for the exotic flavor and distance it suggests.

Hebrides (Line 16) - The Hebrides are a chain of islands off the western coast of Scotland. They are thus geographically close to the highlands where the reaper lives and works—though, in every other sense, they are highly remote places, far from the centers of European cultural life. They are a neat opposite to the "Arabian sands" the speaker invokes earlier in the stanza: frigid, sub-arctic islands as contrasted with blistering equatorial deserts. Between the two the speaker encompasses much of the earth, in terms of both geography and climate. Moreover, he balances the exoticism of "Arabian sands" against a region much better known and closer to his primarily English audience.

Plaintive (Line 18) - The word "plaintive" describes something sorrowful, melancholy, or sad. In this respect, the word is often used to describe the act of mourning, or grief itself. The speaker suggests throughout the poem that the reaper's song is

mournful and sad. Here he continues to advance that suggestion—and begins to speculate about what might cause her to sing in such a sorrowful way.

Numbers (Line 18) - Here the word "numbers" refers to poetic meter, the numbers of syllables that shape a line. The speaker uses the word metaphorically to refer to the measures of music, which, like poetic meter, regulate rhythm. However, by using the word in this primarily poetic sense, the speaker shows his cards: he is thinking about the reaper's song as a poem, in terms of poetry, and comparing his own craft against hers. By using the word, the speaker invites his readers to think about his own—conflicted—meter in this poem that he is writing.

Lay (Line 21) - A song or a short poem (usually written with the intent to be sung). Though the word is now obsolete, it is one of the oldest in the English language, having been used as early as the year 1000 AD. It is especially widely used in poetry (perhaps for its rhyming properties), often in contexts similar to that of "The Solitary Reaper": to refer, that is, to humble, unpretentious songs, folk songs and country ballads, that the poet admires from a distance.

Sickle (Line 28) - A sickle is a curved, or hook-shaped, tool, used to cut barley, wheat, and other grains. It is held in one hand; the reaper uses the other hand to hold the grain steady. It is a traditional agricultural tool, the use of which dates back many millennia—and it has hardly changed in those years. By putting a sickle in the reaper's hands, the speaker emphasizes her connection to this longstanding agricultural tradition—and her distance from the industrial forms of agriculture that were then emerging elsewhere in the British Isles.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Solitary Reaper" is—almost—a ballad. A ballad is a traditional genre of English poetry. It is not a high literary genre like the sonnet or the sestina. Instead, it was largely used for popular poetry and in tavern songs. For much of the history of English poetry, the ballad has held the status of a folk form. Ballads were also popular in Scottish poetry; indeed, it seems likely that the song that the reaper is singing in the poem—whatever it was—would've been a ballad. Ballads usually alternate between lines of iambic tetrameter and lines of iambic trimeter. This is called common meter. They are rhymed ABCB, which means that the second and fourth lines rhyme, but the first and third don't. They have no constraints as to the number of lines—and, as they traveled through taverns and were printed on broadsheets, they often expanded and contracted, as many authors added and then cut new stanzas.

Wordsworth's poem closely imitates the standard ballad—and also deviates from it. For example, it does alternate iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter lines. But instead of doing so every other line, it does so once a stanza: the fourth line of each of the poem's three stanzas are in iambic trimeter; the rest of the lines are in iambic tetrameter. In a ballad, the fourth line would usually be in iambic trimeter—but so would the second. For a popular, folk form like the ballad, this is not necessarily a serious sin. Most ballads are irregular in one way or another; the rules of the form are rarely precisely observed. In Wordsworth's case, however, the poem's formal deviations may serve to underline its implicit questions and concerns. The poet tries to imitate a popular, folk form. But his imitation falls flat. Through the poem's form, then, Wordsworth seeks to create an affinity or connection between his poem and the reaper's song that the poem is attempting to capture. And he dramatizes his failure to so.

Similarly, the first four lines of each stanza are rhymed either ABCB or ABAB, more or less a standard rhyme scheme for a ballad, but the next four lines switch into couplets, rhymed CCDD. These rhymed iambic tetrameter couplets closely echo an elevated literary form, called the heroic couplet.

What this means is that each stanza of the poem, and the poem more generally, starts out looking and sounding like a ballad, but fails to follow exactly the traditional formula. It ends up sounding much more elevated and elite. There is thus a conflict between high and low, popular and elite, forms baked into the poem: the poem switches between the two without deciding which mode of writing is superior. This inconsistency again suggests that the poem is struggling to capture the song that it seeks to describe, and its "code-switching" from low to high forms is a sign of its struggle.

METER

"The Solitary Reaper" alternates between two meters: iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Most of the poem is in iambic tetrameter; while each stanza also contains a single line in iambic trimeter, the fourth line of each stanza. The poem thus comes close to, but fails to observe, common meter—the meter most often used in English ballads. In common meter, iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter lines alternate. The first and third lines of each stanza are in tetrameter; the second and fourth in trimeter. The ballad and its meter were used in popular songs; it was primarily a folk form. In *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge attempted to claim it as a literary form, as they worked to use the unpretentious speech and simple verse forms of everyday people in poetry.

In "The Solitary Reaper," Wordsworth seems less sure that such a project can succeed: the poem calls into question the extent to which poetry can adequately capture the reaper's song—which was itself, most likely, a ballad. The meter—which flirts with but ultimately breaks from the expected common meter of a ballad—signals this failure, embodying both the poet's attempt to affiliate his art with folk forms *and* his inability

to do so. In the final four lines of each stanza, the poem switches into iambic tetrameter couplets. This form closely recalls the heroic couplet—a form prized in the 18th century by elite, learned poets like Alexander Pope. For Wordsworth's early readers, who would've been well-schooled in Pope's meter, the poem would've been a strange and disorienting metrical experience, alternating between a failed ballad and failed heroic couplets. (The iambic tetrameter lines Wordsworth employs here are one foot short of the iambic pentameter line that is the standard for heroic couplets). The poem seemingly cannot decide whether it wants to affiliate itself with high or low forms and thus switch between the two at regular intervals.

The meter is loose and conversational throughout. The poem contains many substitutions, especially trochees (stressed-unstressed) in the first foot. For instance, the first four lines of the poem all begin with a trochee, before settling into the unstressed-stressed iambic rhythm:

> Behold her, single in the field,
> Yon solitary Highland Lass!
> Reaping and singing by herself;
> Stop here, or gently pass!

These first foot trochees do not significantly disrupt the rhythm of the poem. Indeed, they add to its sprightly rhythm: closer to the rapid patter of natural speech than the sometimes tedious flow of an iambic meter. The most significant metrical variation in the poem is thus its deviation from the expected rhythm of a ballad.

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza of "The Solitary Reaper" is eight lines long. These eight line stanzas may be divided in half, yielding two four-line units.

- In the first four lines of each stanza, the poem employs a criss-cross rhyme in which it rhymes ABCB or ABAB.
- In the second four lines of each stanza, the poem rhymes subsequent lines, producing DDEE (or CCDD, depending on the stanza).

What this means is that each stanzas rhyme scheme is internally divergent; they each contain two separate rhyme schemes.

Another way to put it would be to say that the stanzas are composites, in which two rhyme schemes have been combined. This composite rhyme scheme is potentially significant for the interpretation of the poem. The opening four lines of each stanza follow the standard rhyme scheme for a ballad, which traditionally rhymes in a criss-cross patter in four line units:

ABCB DEFE etc.

The poem, and each stanza, begins by generally looking and sounding like a ballad—but then deviates from that pattern, falling into couplets, a rhyme scheme associated less with popular song and more with polished, intellectual, upper-class poetry. The poem's varied rhyme scheme thus marks its distance from the ballad—the solitary reaper's song—that it imitates and describes.

For the most part, the poem uses perfect rhymes: strong and clear, unhesitating. There are two important exceptions. In the first and third lines of the poem, the speaker rhymes "field" and "herself"—or tries to rhyme them: even in a generous account, these words do not rhyme. The poem thus opens with a moment of awkwardness as the poet struggles to find a language adequate to the music he heard from the lass. Similarly, in the first and third lines of the fourth stanza, the rhyme breaks down; the speaker offers "sang" and "work" as end-words, an awkward and unrhyming pair. This is a significant disruption: the failed rhyme suggests that there is some opposition between singing and working. Needless to say, this opposition does not exist for the reaper, who sings as she works: it is a limitation of the speaker's *own* relationship with song.

These two breaks in the rhyme come in structurally similar places in the poem: the first and fourth stanzas both describe the reaper herself (while the second and third stanzas try to describe her song). In these breaks, the poem most closely resembles the rhyme scheme of traditional ballads: as though the poem starts out in close sympathy with the reaper and then falls away.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Solitary Reaper" is an anonymous traveler, who has recently been to Scotland. The speaker withholds much vital information about himself: the reader does not know his age, his class, or his nationality. The reader does not know the reason for his trip, whether business or pleasure.

All these details are withheld from the poem to emphasize the reaper's song: the poem focuses closely on the song, trying to find a language to describe how it sounds. The reader nonetheless can make some inferences about the speaker, based on the way he describes the song. First, the speaker is educated: he deploys a series of literary allusions (and almost clichés) in his attempt to describe the reaper's song. Second, the reader may surmise that the speaker is not Scottish: he does not understand the reaper's song, which was presumably sung in Scots, the national language of Scotland at the time. The speaker, then, is a foreign presence, distant from the things he describes; however powerful the song, he returns to a life far removed from its singer.

Finally, because Wordsworth himself took a trip to Scotland in 1803 and wrote the poem shortly thereafter, many readers have assumed that the speaker is Wordsworth himself. If this is true, the poem's implicit reflections on the powers—and failures—of poetry become sharper and more urgent: Wordsworth was, at the time he wrote the poem, engaged in a series of important battles over how to write poetry, what poetry should (and shouldn't be). "The Solitary Reaper" may engage in these debates, reinforcing Wordsworth's own arguments for a poetry that uses, as he wrote, "the language really used by men."

SETTING

The setting of "The Solitary Reaper" is complex, two-fold. At first, the poem seems to be set in a rural region of Scotland, in the early part of the 19th century. (Indeed, it was composed after the poet visited Scotland with his sister in 1803). It describes a rural world: valleys and grain, sickles and fields. The speaker of the poem seems to be observing that rural world directly, describing what he sees immediately in front of him.

However, the switch to the past tense in the poem's final stanza suggests that the truth may be more complicated. As the speaker reveals in the poem's final lines, he is describing a memory. Though he tells the reader about his experience in Scotland, he is elsewhere, some other part of England—from which he reflects on his travel.

The poem thus has two settings. On the one hand, there is the scene that it describes in detail. On the other, there is the place that the speaker describes it from, a place he *doesn't* describe—though he makes it clear that it is distant and different from the Scottish countryside. Much of the poem's energy and anxiety derives from the discrepancy between these two settings: the poet attempts to recapture in poetry the innocent agricultural world he has left behind—and, in important respects, he fails to do so.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Solitary Reaper" was written at the height of Romanticism, a literary movement that began at the end of the 18th century and stretched into the mid-19th century. Romanticism is broad and complex. It emerged, in part, as a response to the European Enlightenment, a philosophical movement that stressed rationality and classical order. By contrast, the Romantics valorized emotion and irrationality. They glorified medieval texts and traditions instead of classical precedents—and they often put a strong emphasis on folk forms. They sought pleasure in emotions that the Enlightenment had suppressed, such as horror, terror, and the sublime—often finding such emotions in the overwhelming beauty of the natural world.

Wordsworth was one of the leading figures of British Romanticism, particularly in the early period of his career. Wordsworth's Romanticism is arguably less intense and highly wrought than some of his contemporaries. He is rarely interested in terror and awe. Though he argues that poetry derives from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," that emotion must be "recollected in tranquility" in order to make art. In other words, Wordsworth acknowledges that powerful emotion is necessary for poetry, but he also stresses a remove, a retreat from the emotion itself: the poet requires a bit of distance in order to process his emotions and make them into art.

Wordsworth's affiliations with Romanticism are often felt most strongly in his interest in folk forms. In *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), co-written with the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth attempts to use "the language really used by men" in his poetry, avoiding the high diction and classical allusion that had clotted much poetry produced in the 18th century. Similarly, he employs forms like the ballad: folk forms, mostly used for popular songs and broadsheet verse. Against the classicism of 18th century poets like Alexander Pope, Wordsworth uses everyday language and everyday forms to talk about humble, unpretentious subjects. "The Solitary Reaper" might be described as a collision between these two ways of writing. It employs a modified ballad form and it describes a quotidian agricultural scene, finding great beauty in that scene. (And it does so at some distance, reflecting on the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' 'in tranquility'). But it also tries to do so with traditional, classical poetic techniques—for instance, comparing the reaper to a "nightingale." The failure of this language to adequately describe the reaper's song supports Wordsworth's broader project: to argue that the traditional ways of English poetry have become clichés, and that such poetry cannot capture this lovely but unpretentious rural scene. A new kind of language and a new kind of poetry will be necessary, the poem suggests.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Solitary Reaper" was written in 1803 or 1804, following a trip Wordsworth took to Scotland with his sister Dorothy. It was published in 1807. The poem thus belongs to an important, transitional period in English political and economic life. The radicalism of the French Revolution (1789-1799) had collapsed into terror and murder. While its idealism had initially attracted many young English intellectuals, its failure turned them away. In the first decade of the 19th century, Wordsworth himself was beginning to retreat to a more cautious, conservative political position—a position he would hold for the rest of his career.

At the same time, England was undergoing important economic transformations, with the rise of the First Industrial Revolution

(ca. 1760-1840). As the use of steam and water power increased, many jobs which were previously done by hand began to be performed by machines. For many rural populations, whose income had relied on the older forms of manual labor, this transition was disastrous. In the early years of the First Industrial Revolution, the English countryside emptied out, vast populations moving to urban centers, seeking employment in the new factories, often for a fraction of the wage they had previously made. The result was widespread unemployment, vagrancy, and social unrest. As Marjorie Levinson argues in "Insight and Oversight: Reading 'Tinturn Abbey,'" Wordsworth was deeply aware of these social transformations and witnessed the displacement and homelessness they caused in his travels around England. However, he often consciously suppressed the evidence of such social discord, removing beggars and the homeless from his accounts of English landscapes and rural life. His poems are thus often nostalgic, yearning for a pre-Industrial way of life. "The Solitary Reaper" may be said to participate in this nostalgia. The reaper uses traditional tools. She works in a landscape without factories or railways, unmarred by the rapid industrialization going on elsewhere in the British Isles. And though the speaker speculates that her song may engage with political struggle, he imagines it simply as "old, unhappy, far-off things": her music does not engage with the political struggles of her own time. The poem thus may be said to work to suppress its own historical and economic context.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Manuscript of "The Solitary Reaper" — A digital reproduction of the original manuscript for "The Solitary Reaper," currently in the holdings of the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-the-solitary-reaper-by-william-wordsworth)
- Biography of William Wordsworth — A brief biography of Wordsworth from the British Library, with extensive links to other articles on aspects of Wordsworth's life and thought. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-wordsworth)
- Reading of "The Solitary Reaper" — A reading of "The Solitary Reaper" from Pearls of Wisdom (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoWHTKMRiyY)
- The Romantics — An article on the history of British Romanticism from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics)
- Preface to Lyrical Ballads — Wordsworth's preface to the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, in which he lays out his theory of poetry and his relationship with Romanticism. (https://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The World Is Too Much With Us

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Altman, Toby. "*The Solitary Reaper.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Altman, Toby. "*The Solitary Reaper.*" LitCharts LLC, January 23, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-wordsworth/the-solitary-reaper.