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Higher Studies

# **The Solitary Reaper of Wordsworth**

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# Introduction

Wordsworth is a great love poet, but not the usual love between man and women. His love poetry cheerfully calls to our hearts. As a critic puts it "Spenser made a Wonderful fusion between concrete and abstract love. Shelley dispelled in his poetry the best of the platonic love.... Byron mixed the furious spirit in his love poems ; but none of them has reached so near to the chambers of our hearts as the homeliness of Wordsworth love poetry "(Mukherjee:2005,p.62)As a poet of love Wordsworth does not restrict himself to the treatment of passions or love between to young lovers. His love poems are curiously sexless .As Grierson and Smith put it : in passion "Wordsworth is not a love poet in the usual sense . He was not incapable of passion, but except in the Vaundracour and Julia he avoided it as a theme for poetry. The Lucy poems breathe a deep and tender affection, but they are not passionate"(Ibid).

It is not the sexual passion that moved Wordsworth but the love of friendship, country, and family. In Dorothy's words, he had a violence of affection, his brother's death almost overwhelmed him, the death of his second boy aged him by ten years, Dorcas' death broke his Heart. It was his unequal power, the love of father for son, of brother for brother, of mother for child, in Michael, The Brother, and The Affliction of Margaret.

The central theme moved Wordsworth's poem of incidents in human life is love, , its power to inflict the deepest wounds and to heal the most irreparable .Love is the theme of Poems such as Goody Blake and Harry Gill , Simon Lee , Thee Thorn , The Last of the Flock .The Mad Mother . The Idiot Boy , and The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Women .Love

not as passion in the narrow sense of the word but passionate affection , its 'Wily subtiles and refluxes ' , this is what Wordsworth is in quest of in a finer poems- Michael , The Brother ,Margaret .The Affliction Later of Margaret , Ruth, The Happy Warrior ,The Wight Doe of Rylstone ; and to these should be added the Stories narrated by the Parson in the Excursion , and yet more the patriotic sonnets . Sympathy with his fellow-men and for their welfare, that is the key note of all his poetry, the source and inspiration of the joy of which he sings.

# The Solitary Reaper

"It was harvest-time, and the fields were quietly—might I be allowed to say contemplatively?—enlivened by small companies of reapers. It is not uncommon in the more lonely parts of the Highlands to see a single person so employed"( Gill:2010,p.757). A note in 1807 identified the origin of the poem in a sentence from Thomas Wilkinson's Tours to the British Mountains (1824), which had been known to Wordsworth. It reads: "sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle, the sweetest human voice I ever heard," and whose "strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious long after they were heard no more" Wilkinson ( Zilleruelo:2013,)

In the first stanza the speaker comes across a beautiful girl working alone in the fields of Scotland (the Highland). She is "Reaping and singing by herself." He tells the reader not to interrupt her, and then mentions that the valley is full of song.

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 second stanza is a list of things that cannot equal the beauty of the girl's singing:

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.

In the third stanza the reader learns that the speaker cannot understand the words being sung. He can only guess at what she might be singing about:

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?

In the fourth and final stanza the speaker tells the reader that even though he did not know what she was singing about, the music stayed in his heart as he continued up the hill:

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.

## Analysis

Part of what makes this poem so fascinating is the fact that the speaker does not understand the words being sung by the beautiful young lady, yet some critics see that it is just a rhetorical question, but during his tour he was not able to manage the Erse language. In the third stanza, he is forced to imagine what she might be singing about. He supposes that she may be singing about history and things that happened long ago, or some sadness that has happened in her own time and will happen again. As the speaker moves on, he carries the music of the young lady with him in his heart. This is a prevalent theme in much of Wordsworth's poetry. For instance, the same idea is used in "I wandered lonely as a cloud" when the speaker takes the memory of the field of daffodils with him to cheer him up on bad days. ([www.gradesaver.com/wordsworths](http://www.gradesaver.com/wordsworths))

The Highland Lass [i.e. 'Solitary Reaper'] is delightful, when all is so beautiful, perhaps I should not select any particular passage, but the local tradition is crucial, just as the reaper's song and the Highland girl's greeting were. Without them, his voicing of the Highland silence would seem too foreign, too much a tourist's imposition. (Fullford: 2006, 187). The primary emphasis here is a phenomenological one—the poet's consciousness of his own states of consciousness stirred and quickened by scenes of nature or events. Examining the text how Wordsworth's self-consciousness is linked to the subject, form and structure of his particular poems. The basis of his spiritual life was his contact with nature which was a source of renovation and self-renewal for him. It is true that there is sometimes a disproportion between Wordsworth's emotional response to a scene and the scene itself. Hartman holds that

such a disproportion is natural to a man conscious of himself, and that it links Wordsworth's precarious condition to a self-consciousness that may appear egotistical. Thus in exploring the significance of Wordsworth's poetry Hartman shifts critical attention from the qualities associated with the poet's "egotistical sublime" to the nature and growth of his self-consciousness and its "actual or hidden relation to the possibilities of self-renewal". This is the viewpoint in which Hartman offers his interpretive readings of "The Solitary Reaper," In this context he introduces two relatively new concepts, that of the poet Wordsworth as a halted traveller and of "surmise" as a rhetorical figure in romantic poetry in general and in Wordsworth in particular. The Solitary Reaper, a poem which he judges to have the degree of complexity necessary for full illustration of Wordsworth's theory. about the image of the poet as a halted traveller and about "the poetry of surmise" in which Wordsworth seems to have excelled. "The Solitary Reaper" expresses the poet's response to a Highland lass who harvests alone in the field singing a melancholic song to herself. The poet is strongly moved, but he does not say why he is moved. Hartman observes that the initial surprise turns into something thoughtful, and that there is "an inward sinking" as if the mind is moved by itself after having been moved by the Highland girl. The inward sinking or turning-the reflexive consciousness-is quite clear. The poet himself is made to stop, reflect, and listen, like a traveler who has come on the scene by chance. Hartman's commentary on the poem seen as the expression of the poet's self-consciousness runs as follows: The opening stanza presents a strange situation in which a Highland girl reaps corn, singing a melancholy song to herself. (Reaping is usually a communal and joyful activity). This situation arouses something more than surprise in the poet; it arouses in him a sense of the mystery of life. The opening line "Behold her, single in the field" is addressed to the reader while the

fourth line "Stop here, or gently pass" is said by the poet to the reader or to himself. Again, "O listen!" is addressed either to the reader or to the poet himself which shows that both the reaper and her song have the power to halt the traveller. The poet presents the image of a halted traveller. The poet's strong initial response to the situation intensifies his self-awareness. It "signals the influx of an unusual state of consciousness which is quickly normalized". The poem is "a reaction to this consciousness as well as its expression". It is the product of two kinds of consciousness, "old and new, ordinary and supervening" gathered around the image of the solitary.

Some of the elements in the pattern may vary, and some appear implicitly. "The Solitary Reaper" expresses states of mind based on or animated by surmise. "Stop here, or gently pass" is an instance occurring in the first stanza which is directed against the purely determinate. Hartman points out that the third stanza consists of two surmises, first about the possible historical or mythical past associated with the theme of the song /"Will no one tell me what she sings?"/. Second. related to the return to the familiar theme:

Or is it some more humble lay,

Familiar matter of today?

(2 1 -22)

Surmise has its effect on the rhythm, on the verbal figures, on variation; of mood, and in fact on the entire poem. By the use of surmise Wordsworth achieves an expansion of spirit and mood. As Hartman finely puts it, By surmise he multiplies his moods, if not the phenomenon. His surmises have a pattern, which is to proceed through the solitary to the social and from stasis to motion, or to make these interchangeable.

Yet everything stays in the realm of surmise, which approves in any case, of such fluidity.

In Wordsworth, , surmise is not merely a rhetorical figure or even a figure of thought, but a whole way of feeling and expression and an inalienable part of the poetic texture. In "The Solitary Reaper" the poet's mind moves away from the present object to the past and the future, but keeps returning to it. In Wordsworth's poetry Nature is the chief power which guides and fosters the growth of self-consciousness.

From "Componential Approach" the study of meaning by analyzing the different parts of words, in this poem, one can find that the poet attempts to make use of synonymy to show or represent one of his basic themes, the theme of isolation and loneliness. This theme is one of the recurrent notions in the romantic poetry, in general and W. Wordsworth, in particular (Al-Hindawi and Musaab,)

a. Solitary: adj. done alone/ enjoying being alone/ alone

(person, place, animal....)/ single.

b. By herself: alone/ without anyone else.

c. Farthest: at the greatest distance in space, direction or time.

d. Far-off: distant/ faraway/remote.

According to the componential analysis approach, these words can have the mutual features [+ isolation] and [+ loneliness]. These synonyms help building up the thematic coherence of the poem because they are related to one of the main themes of the poem.

## Isolation

The reaper, “single,” “solitary,” and “by herself,” has her solitude mirrored in the speaker, who suffers from an equally disconcerting crisis of isolation. Whether the interlocutor whom he beseeches in line four to either “stop . . . or gently pass” represents an actual travelling companion or his own internal restlessness personified, he remains fixated upon the reaper’s song to the detriment of his connection with the other figures, internal or external, who populate the poem’s narrative, suggesting a solitude that trumps society. We have, then, reaper and speaker, two solitary figures ironically united in their shared solitude and their participation in the failed act of communication that is the reaper’s song, which the speaker characterizes as a “melancholy strain”. As becomes clear when the speaker asks “Will no one tell me what she sings?”, he does not speak the reaper’s tongue, and therefore, in order to attribute a melancholy quality to her song, he must rely not upon what its signifiers signify to his faculties of cognition, but upon what the sounds of the signifiers, divorced from their semiotic content, convey to him in an affective capacity. He appears to have felt, rather than interpreted, the transmission not of meaning per se, but of a feeling so acutely affecting that he almost immediately insulates himself from it with a self-generated quantity of semiotic content:

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? (18-24)

## Women in this poem

In general, Wordsworth does not deal with women as up normal ,but as beautiful and important part of nature, the striking and obvious choose of the rustic situations in his poetry as integral part of the romantic in general is significant in his depiction of women from the middle or the

working class using the every-day language showing her working in the farm as in the Solitary Reaper .Poetry enjoyed a special significance within these widespread new speculations on sexuality and gender. “Poetry is ...a passion, ”declared William Wordsworth in his “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” and proceeded to spiritualize this passion through narratives of maturation, wherein his poetry assumes a sacred status as “spousal verse” celebrating the union of male poet and female nature. Yet for Letitia Landon, Wordsworth is the “most passionless of writers,” and it is instead Byron who is “our poet of passion.”(Chandler and Maureen:2008,p.156).

Women played an important role in the life of Wordsworth, he lost his mother at the age of nine and he loved his sister Dorothy which compensated him for the death of his mother. In France he married a women, and he had a daughter but he couldn't often see them , he loved them but he couldn't have the time to see them ,after the French revolution he had to get back to England ,the influence of his mother of his sister are so clear in his poetry. Women in his poetry have symbolic significance they stand for love they are associated with nature sometimes they symbolized England they stand for beauty .that is why we can't regard him as a love poet. The last line of The Solitary Reaper is: / music in my heart I bore,/Long after it was heard no more. In this line the Reaper became a symbol

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