**The Solitary Reaper**

[**William Wordsworth**](https://www.enotes.com/topics/william-wordsworth)

**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**

“The Solitary Reaper” by William Wordsworth is a poem about a young woman from the Scottish Highlands who is singing as she reaps the grain in her field.

* The speaker of the poem cannot understand the words of the song, but he muses on what the subject of the sad song could be.
* He watches her singing over her work for quite some time, remaining absolutely still all the while so as not to disturb her or disrupt her song.
* Finally, he climbs the hill to leave her valley, but as he does so, he continues to carry the music with him for a long time.

**Summary**

The speaker of this poem by William Wordsworth sees a young “Highland lass” (woman from the Scottish Highlands) singing as she reaps the grain in her field. He tells readers that they must either stop here and listen or pass by gently so as not to disturb her and her song. The woman works alone, cutting and binding her crop, and the song she sings is rather sad. It fills the entire valley where she works. The speaker claims that no nightingale has ever sounded so welcome to weary travelers in “Arabian sands” (when they hear this bird, they know they will get to stop for the night and rest), and the cuckoo has never thrilled a sailor (who would hear the bird and know that land was near) among the remote Scottish isles called the Hebrides as much as this woman’s voice affects the speaker. It feels incredibly welcome to him, offering him a sense of relief.

The speaker cannot understand the words of the song that the woman sings, and he wishes that someone could tell him. He muses for a while on what the subject of the sad song could be, thinking that it might be a remembrance of some tragic long-past war or harder times, or it could describe something more modern and usual, or it could even emphasize some real sorrow or pain felt by the singer and that could be felt again in the future. Whatever the subject is, he says, the Scottish woman sings the song as if it would never end. He watches her singing over her work, over the bending sickle, for quite some time, remaining absolutely still all the while so as not to disturb her or disrupt her song. Finally, he climbs the hill to leave her valley, but as he does so, he continues to carry the music with him for a long time; even after he can no longer actually hear it with his ears, it remains in his heart.

# Themes

### The Power of Music

The speaker in the poem is deeply affected by the song the young Scottish woman sings, even though he cannot understand the words. It is clear from the melody that it is a somewhat melancholy, sad tune, and he begins to consider what the subject might be. The speaker imagines that the subject could be something old and unhappy, like a battle that took place long ago, or, perhaps, it is something more modern and familiar to the singer, or, finally, it could even be a song about some kind of “natural sorrow, loss, or pain.” Whatever it is does not seem to matter much, however, as the speaker is so affected by the song that he continues to remember it long after he can hear it. The fact that he cannot understand the words is likely part of what leaves the speaker so haunted by the song; this unknown quality lends the song an especially timeless, mysterious, transcendent air. The speaker is therefore able to experience the song as pure beauty and emotion, rather than as a collection of lyrics pertaining to some particular subject.

### Connection to Nature

The speaker says that the Highland lass’s voice is more welcoming than a nightingale’s, even to a weary traveler who hears it and knows that it is finally time to rest. Her voice is likewise more “thrilling” than a cuckoo’s, even to a sailor on far-off seas who knows that the sound of the bird means that land is near. The Scottish woman’s song is more affecting, more inspiring of emotion than either of these, and the comparison of her voice to that of a bird firmly establishes the lass as part of nature. Her cutting and binding of grain also connects her to the earth—she is literally reaping, or harvesting, crops in a “Vale profound,” or deep valley, in the Scottish countryside where the speaker is walking. As a Romantic, Wordsworth found inspiration in the natural world, and this poem is exemplary of his work: the speaker discovers a glimpse of the sublime in the pastoral setting of which the reaper’s song forms a part.

### Memory

In the end, the speaker says that he finally leaves the young woman to her work and her song, continuing on his way. However, as he climbs the hill that forms a boundary of her valley, he continues to bear the “music in [his] heart” even after he can no longer hear the woman’s voice. The last stanza of the poem begins to use past-tense verbs (e.g., “sang,” “mounted,” “bore”) rather than the present-tense verbs of the three earlier stanzas, indicating that the speaker really has left the singing woman behind and has had to move on. However, it is clear that she has so affected him that he will remember this moment and return to these emotions each time he does. The beauty of the solitary reaper’s song has imprinted itself on the speaker’s memory.

# Analysis

In every respect, “The Solitary Reaper” by William Wordsworth employs elements of Romantic English poetry. This lyrical ballad, which can also be classified as a pastoral, focuses heavily on human emotion and the place of the individual in a natural setting. The setting here is a key element of the poem. The reader is transported to the Scottish Highlands, where they can easily imagine coming across a lone woman singing as she works in the fields. Wordsworth, like many of his contemporary Romantic poets, employs the landscape of a rural setting to set the mood of the poem. In it, we see the beauty that arises when an individual is dwarfed by the great size of the natural world around them. In fact, many of Wordsworth’s poems feature a lone figure that the speaker encounters while wandering around in the great outdoors. This poem, as the title would suggest, is no different.

Wordsworth employs several literary devices in order to communicate his ideas in the poem’s thirty-two lines. In beginning the poem with the line “Behold, her single in the field,” he makes use of apostrophe, in which a poem’s speaker addresses an object, an abstract idea, or a person who is not present in the poem itself—in this case, the reader. Wordsworth also uses metaphor to compare the Highland woman’s singing to that of a nightingale or a cuckoo, emphasizing both the transcendent beauty of the song and the connection of the woman to the natural world.

The solitariness of the woman in the field is repeated throughout this short ballad. In fact, most of her descriptors serve only to describe her solitariness. In just the eight lines of the first stanza, she is “single in the field,” “solitary,” “by herself,” and “alone.” Her song is described as “plaintive” and “melancholy.” The speaker, too, appears to be alone in this “Vale profound,” as he makes no mention of friends or traveling companions. All of this serves to paint a picture of humankind’s smallness compared to the vastness of nature.

At the same time, Wordsworth revolves his entire ballad around the lone reaper. She is at the center of all that he imagines, be it the epic battles of which she might be singing, the far-off Arabian deserts, or the remote islands of the Hebrides. This is another aspect of Romanticism, extrapolating large ideas from an otherwise small subject. In this solitary woman’s song, the words of which he cannot understand, the speaker experiences great beauty, deep emotion, and a rousing of his own imaginative powers.

All this is evident in the main idea of the poem. Throughout the four stanzas, Wordsworth is communicating the idea that imagination and emotion have the power to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and transport us to far-off times and places. Something as mundane as seeing and hearing a lone peasant working in the fields has taken the speaker far beyond his present setting and brought him to wherever his mind can imagine. As with so many of the works of Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics, we are reminded that our perceived experience is just one small element of a greater and mysterious reality.

# The Poem

“The Solitary Reaper” is a short lyrical ballad, composed of thirty-two lines and divided into four stanzas. As the title suggests, the poem is dominated by one main figure, a Highland girl standing alone in a field harvesting grain. The poem is written in the first person and can be classified as a pastoral, or a literary work describing a scene from country life. The eyewitness narration conveys the immediacy of personal experience, giving the reader the impression that the poet did not merely imagine the scene but actually lived it. However, Wordsworth’s sister, Dorothy, writes in her Recollections of a Tour in Scotland that the idea for “The Solitary Reaper” was suggested to William by an excerpt from Thomas Wilkinson’s Tour in Scotland. Since Wordsworth’s poem is not autobiographical, one can assume that the poet is adopting a persona, or taking on a fictional identity (usually referred to as the “speaker” of the poem).

“The Solitary Reaper” begins with the speaker asking the reader to “behold” the girl as she works in the field. The first stanza is a straightforward description of the scene. The girl is standing alone in the field, cutting grain, and singing a “melancholy strain.” Wordsworth emphasizes the girl’s solitude by using words such as “single,” “solitary,” “by herself,” and “alone.” Solitaries are common figures in Wordsworth’s poetry and are usually surrounded by a natural environment. The act of reaping alone in the field binds the girl intimately to the earth. Also, as the girl sings and the melody fills the lonely valley, she becomes almost completely merged with nature.

The next two stanzas describe the speaker’s reaction to the maiden’s song. The words of the song are in a language unknown to him, but he remains transfixed by the melody, which seems to stretch the limits of time and space. He associates the sweetness of the reaper’s song with the beautiful cries of the nightingale and the cuckoo, both familiar images of transcendence in Romantic poetry. As he allows the song to engulf his consciousness, he envisions far-off places and times of long ago. His imagination transports him from the field in which he stands to the edge of infinity.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker abruptly shifts his attention from his musings to the scene before him. He continues to listen, but the transcendent moment is past. He again calls attention to the reaper, who is unaware of the speaker’s presence or the effect her song has had on him. As the speaker walks away from the field, the song fades from his hearing, but its plaintive melody echoes in his heart and his imagination.

# Forms and Devices

Wordsworth uses several poetic devices in “The Solitary Reaper.” Among them is apostrophe, which is defined as a figure of speech where the speaker of the poem addresses a dead or absent person, an abstraction, or an inanimate object. At the beginning of the poem the speaker invites the reader to “Behold, her single in the field,/ Yon solitary Highland Lass!” He further cautions the reader to “Stop here, or gently pass!” Although the reader is not present, the speaker’s imperative to “behold” the girl at her work puts the reader vicariously in the company of the speaker, as if they were walking the Highlands together. After the first four lines, the speaker shifts his attention away from the implied presence of the reader and does not allude to it again.

Metaphor, another common poetic device, is also found in “The Solitary Reaper.” The poet uses metaphor to compare two images without explicitly stating the comparison. For example, in the second stanza the speaker compares the song of the reaper to those of the nightingale and cuckoo. Although the three songs are fundamentally different from one another, they become metaphors for transcendence as they suggest to the speaker distant times and places. Because the maiden’s song is in a language unknown to the speaker, he is freed from trying to understand the words and is able to give his imagination full rein. The bird-songs and the girl’s song are thus intertwined, a further link of the maiden to nature.

Suggestion through imagery is also used in connection with the reaper herself. The poet offers little description of her beyond the bare essentials given in stanzas 1 and 4. All the reader knows is that the reaper is a simple peasant girl singing a rather sad song while harvesting grain in a field. However, the speaker’s imaginative associations make her much more. He connects her with shady haunts of Arabian sands, the cuckoo and the nightingale, the seas beyond the Hebrides, epic battles, and the common human experiences of sorrow and pain. From his perspective, she becomes the center of the universe, if only for a moment. Like her song, she dwarfs time and space, to become a metaphor for the eternal.

Music is also a dominant image in the poem. It is reinforced by the ballad form whose tones, rhythms, and rhymes emphasize the lyrical feeling. The musical image is further underscored by the use of alliteration. The repetition of s sounds, which are threaded throughout the poem, lends a tonal unity to the piece. For example, in the first four lines of the first stanza, fourteen words contain s. This pattern is repeated in the other stanzas but decreases toward the end of the poem as the reaper’s song releases its grip on the consciousness of the speaker.