

Comparison of Two Works by William Wordsworth

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Know in deep about Sir William Wordsworth and his great mastery works.

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William Wordsworth, "The Daffodils" and "The Solitary Reaper"

The Romantic Period

The Romantic period in Europe saw the end of the dominance of the Renaissance tradition. One result was the rediscovery of local cultures, and a flowering of vernacular literatures. The Romantic period saw changes in philosophy, politics, and religion, as well as in the arts of literature, painting, and music, changes which the English Romantic poets both articulated and symbolized. In philosophy the Romantic period saw a reaction against the rationalism of the 18th century. It was a reaction against a view of the physical world increasingly dominated by science, and of the mental world by the theories of Locke. The Romantic poets rebelled against the emphasis on the material and on "common sense" which had dominated the preceding period.

For the Romantics society had become an evil force moulding and stunting its citizens. One of the many consequences of these ideas for the poets one was the flight from the city. The Romantic poets on the whole fled from the city. Of the many social evils of the late 18th and early 19th centuries "the slave trade, the treatment of the poor, press-gangs" one was beginning to be recognized as a new and growing threat: industrialization (Blake's poems). By and large the description of mass industrialization is a feature of mid-19th-century literature. But the description of the cast of mind that causes it to happen was first recognized for what it was by the Romantics.

It is hardly surprising therefore to learn that the Romantic poets turned to nature. This is not to imply that their predecessors did not write about the natural world. They did, but they tended to appreciate different things there. Nature needed the help of man if she was to fulfil herself. The Romantics describe many different kinds of natural scene, and they are if not "wild" as least independent of man. Many of the poets of this period found their deepest experiences in nature. For them it was nature, rather than society, that was man's proper setting: man needed the help of nature to fulfil himself.

In the search for a spiritual truth the Romantic poets used two faculties which rationalism had tended to discredit: feelings (Wordsworth in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads: "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings") and the imagination. The imagination in the Romantic period was raised from being simply the faculty for creating fictions, pleasing perhaps, but not necessarily true, to a method of apprehending and communicating truth. The result was that the search for spiritual truth became one in which the poet played a greater role than before. The imagination, the peculiar gift of the poet, was now enlisted in man's most important endeavour.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth, Cumberland. He went to Cambridge University where he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They worked in collaboration for a time. In 1797 the two

Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth, Cumberland. He went to Cambridge University where he met Samuel

were living near each other in Somerset. The result was one of the most important publications of the Romantic period, a collection of *Lyrical Ballads, With a Few Other Poems*, published in Bristol in 1798. According to Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads* was that he should supply poems whose subject-matter was supernatural, while Wordsworth's would deal with ordinary life. Coleridge honoured his part of the bargain with "The Ancient Mariner", which appeared as the first poem in the collection. Of the remainder the greater number were by Wordsworth. A second edition in 1800 contained more poems and a "Preface" by Wordsworth in which he expounded his views on poetry.

It is important to notice what is new in the "Preface". The ambition to trace "the primary laws of our nature" would have been shared by many of his Augustan predecessors. What is new in Wordsworth is to look for them in "common life". Appropriately to his subject-matter the language of Wordsworth's poems was to be "a selection of the language really used by men". In making such a claim Wordsworth was declaring his opposition to the convention of "poetic diction" which he

thought had rendered the language of poetry artificial.

Wordsworth's contributions to the Lyrical Ballads commonly explore the submerged tragedies in society, the sufferings of old age, poverty, and desertion, which have often left their victim half-crazed. He writes about basic relationships, especially that of parent and child, where the emotions are intense and instinctive. Some of his poems take the form of monologues overheard by the poet, such as "The Female Vagrant" and "The Mad Mother". Others are shaped round an encounter between the poet and another person. The other person is usually very old, like "The Old Cumberland Beggar", or young, like the child in "We are Seven". A third sort are tales, often founded on some slight incident or anecdote that Wordsworth had heard. Of these the best known is "The Idiot Boy".

The major theme of Wordsworth's poetry was the influence of nature on man, and as well as exploring it socially he explored it autobiographically. As a child he had felt the influence of nature very strongly. It brought intense haunting pleasure, and also exerted over him a tutelary power.

“The Daffodils” and “The Solitary Reaper”

Both “The Solitary Reaper” and “The Daffodils” are told by a speaker, perhaps by the same one. He narrates them in the first person and the listener sees the events through his eyes and his thoughts. He walks in nature and his description of the environments, his feelings and his thoughts in the two poems are so detailed that the listener can imagine them easily, thus can become a part of the poem. The poems have impact on the listener, “an apparently simple sensation or feeling has the power to irradiate the mind, either immediately or in memory”.

“The Solitary Reaper” is about reaping which usually takes place at the end of August or at the beginning of September; therefore reaping can refer to the beginning of autumn while in “The Daffodils” the daffodils are considered to be the forerunners of spring in England. Spring means the initiation of something new, and means birth as well, as opposed to autumn that is usually connected to death and something old.

The reaper is in the centre of “The Solitary Reaper”, the speaker is only a listener who is not involved in the narrative, thus he can be seen

as a passive outsider. He does not want to be in contact with the lass despite the fact that he is very curious about what she sings. Hence he remains in the background in contrast with "The Daffodils" in which he begins the poem with himself and refers to himself as a cloud in the first line of the first stanza ("I wandered lonely as a cloud") therefore the attention of the listener is on the speaker and not on the daffodils, which appear later in the poem. In addition, he is more active in the poem since as a cloud he is part of nature where flowers live and he takes part in their joyful dance, too. He does not want to remain in the background, like in the other poem.

Both poems concern with the same topic: loneliness. However, they deal with it in different ways. In "The Solitary Reaper", as the title indicates, it is the reaper who is lonely. In the first line of the first stanza the listener gets to know that she is a lass who cuts and binds the grain alone. Nevertheless, the speaker, who tells the story, can also be seen as a lonely person. "He is alone, isolated from the reaper's community (he does not understand her language)." In "The Daffodils" it is the poet who is alone and he declares right in the first line that, "I wandered lonely as a cloud." He is the only one

who is lonely in this poem because the other characters, the daffodils are in a crowd, in never-ending line / Along the margin of a bay. The main difference between the two poems is that at the end of *The Solitary Reaper* the girl remains sorrowful and the natural scenery does not cheer her up in contrast with *The Daffodils*, in which the flowers brighten up the poet, who always remembers this event joyfully.

Exile appears in both poems. Although the lass can be viewed as being in a community: she is in community, even as she reaps and sings alone, but she is isolated from it as well, because she reaps alone on the field. As far as the other poem is concerned, as a whole (it) is not about daffodils, except as the focal point of a much wider perception. It is about the complex life of nature, and man's sense of exile from that life. On the other hand, the poet feels like being at home in the community of the daffodils, perhaps more at home than in the human community since when he is in vacant or in pensive mood he thinks about the daffodils and then his heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils. It fortifies that he cannot find his place in the human world, he is more joyous in the world of the flowers.

It is not negligible that in *The Solitary Reaper* the lass is in nature as well, but she is doing hard work, alone, without help. She goes there to cut and bind the grain to have something to eat, and not to delight in the flowers. Although she is in nature circled by grain, which is not as beautiful as the flowers, this scenery and hard work cannot cheer her up, rather, awake the sorrow in her and due to this she sings a melancholy strain.

In *The Daffodils* the speaker only has to admire the flowers, he does not have any obligations, therefore the beauty and happiness of the daffodils can make him happier easily.

A similarity can be found between her and the speaker of *The Daffodils* for the reason that he is alone in the crowd of the flowers and she is alone in the crowd of the grain. No other person is mentioned around the girl despite the fact that reaping is usually done by several people at the same time. The lass is not aimless as opposed to the speaker of the poem, and she does not compare herself with some of the nature's elements, either. She is not only lonely, but also a kind of mysterious figure who sings a sorrowful song. Even more importantly: although she sings, she is not given a voice in the poem.

Although the girl is a human being and she sings in a human language, the poet cannot understand her song at all. He only hears and also fears that she chants about some mournful events. The flowers in the other poem are in contrast with the lass as they are not human beings, they do not speak a human language, but the poet can understand their wish easily, therefore he accepts their invitation and shares their enjoyment and happiness.

It is important to note that in *The Daffodils* the word *host* can have two different meanings. On the one hand, it means the mass of soldiers, *a loose yet ordered array* which can bear a resemblance to the crowd of the flowers. On the other hand, *host* can mean someone who invites and entertains guests, thus the speaker can be seen to be a guest and the daffodils invite and entertain him with their beauty and their dance. The speaker accepts this kind of invitation; hence he can take part in their bliss in preference to the girl who seems to be very sad.

The grain in *The Solitary Reaper* is not as important as the flowers in *The Daffodils*. The grain has not got any human characteristics as opposed to the daffodils, which are personalized, therefore have got human

characteristics, such as dancing in the breeze or tossing their heads. In the other poem the speaker compares the chant of the girl with the singing of the nightingale and the cuckoo but none of the birds' song can be equal with the song and the voice of the lass despite the fact that the birds' songs mean the weary traveller who hears in the nightingale's song the rest and the refreshment of an oasis, and for the isolated inhabitant of the distant Hebrides the familiar voice of the cuckoo means the beginning of spring after a long winter. It also shows the superiority of the reaper's human song to the songs of the two highly valued natural singers.

In *The Solitary Reaper* a kind of hesitation can be felt when the speaker cannot decide, when he sees and hears the girl singing, whether to stop here, or gently pass! In *The Daffodils* there is not any evidence for the poet's hesitation. He joins the dance of the daffodils with pleasure and without any uncertainty. He does not feel any distance between the flowers and himself and he wants to be an active part of this beautiful scenery, he does not want to be only a spectator.

The poet in "The Daffodils" draws a parallel between the flowers and the stars: "that shine / And twinkle on the Milky Way."

The golden crowd of the flowers look like as they were shining like the stars in the sky at night. On the one hand, the poet only wants to show the listener the similarities of the flowers and the stars but "we are invited instead to consider the local order" the daffodils growing in a crescent along the lake "within the greater order of the universe." He widens the listener's view and helps him to imagine the universe which he is part of as well as the flowers, however they "are still themselves, each an individual life asserting itself joyfully." We are all part of a greater order but we never lose our identity no matter if we are human beings or flowers. In "The Solitary Reaper" he also widens the listener's view in the third stanza when he tries to find out what the lass sings about. Firstly, he travels back in time and thinks about "old, unhappy, far-off things", for example, a battle which usually causes so many deaths and misery. Then he presumes that it may be a "familiar matter of today", hence now his thoughts are in the present and he tries to find the answer in the contemporary problems. Finally, in the last line of

the stanza the future appears: â may be again?â However hard he tries to find it out, he does not get any solutions to his questions.

None of the poems indicates the progress of time in the first few stanzas, especially â The Daffodilsâ where the listener can only sense the time in the last stanza when the speaker is in another place, and in another time: â when on my couch I lie.â â In â The Solitary Reaperâ the poem begins as a moment â out of timeâ , a transformation of experience so that the very consciousness of passing time disappears. But the ordinary consciousness of time is firmly restored at the end.â However, the listener can be aware of the progress of time earlier than the last stanza since in the third one the past, the present and also the future occur, which also shows the changes of time.

The events in â The Daffodilsâ as well as in â The Solitary Reaperâ have a huge impact on the speaker; therefore he can evoke and live through his meeting with the beautiful flowers and at the end of the poem he declares: â And then my heart with pleasure fill, / And dances with the daffodils.â In the other poem the song of the lass and her loneliness make him sympathise with the girl and he can hear the chant â long af

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