

# The Solitary Reaper

*William Wordsworth*

Lyrical Ballads (1800)

Behold<sup>1</sup> her, single in the field,  
Yon<sup>2</sup> solitary Highland Lass<sup>3</sup>!  
Reaping<sup>4</sup> and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
5 Alone she cuts and binds<sup>5</sup> the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain<sup>6</sup>;  
O listen! for the Vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale<sup>7</sup> did ever chaunt<sup>8</sup>  
10 More welcome notes to weary<sup>9</sup> bands  
Of travellers in some shady haunt<sup>10</sup>,  
Among Arabian sands:  
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
15 Among the farthest Hebrides<sup>11</sup>.

Will no one tell me what she sings? –  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers<sup>12</sup> flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago:  
20 Or is it some more humble lay<sup>13</sup>,  
Familiar matter of today?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er<sup>14</sup> the theme, the Maiden<sup>15</sup> sang  
25 As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle<sup>16</sup> bending: –  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
30 The music in my heart I bore<sup>17</sup>,  
Long after it was heard no more.

- 1 **Behold.** Guarda, osserva.
- 2 **Yon.** Avv. quella.
- 3 **Lass.** Scottish ragazza.
- 4 **Reaping.** Mietendo.
- 5 **binds.** Lega.
- 6 **strain.** Motivo, canto.
- 7 **Nightingale.** Usignolo.
- 8 **did ... chaunt.** Cantò.
- 9 **weary.** Stanche, affaticate.
- 10 **haunt.** Luogo, rifugio.
- 11 **Hebrides.** Le Ebridi (isole a nord-ovest della Scozia).
- 12 **plaintive numbers.** Malinconici versi.
- 13 **lay.** Canto.
- 14 **Whate'er.** Whatever qualunque.
- 15 **Maiden.** Lat. vergine, nubile; qui: ragazza.
- 16 **sickle.** Falce.
- 17 **bore.** Portai.

# The Solitary Reaper

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## Introduction to the Poet

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is considered to be the best of the Romantics. He is better known as 'a poet of Nature'. He brought about a revival and revolution in English poetry. His mighty expressions and vivid imagination changed the artificiality of poetic diction into clarity and simplicity. He derived his themes from the simplest objects of nature. Afterwards, he would recollect those simple objects in tranquility, giving birth to a spontaneous and continuous flow of poetry.

Wordsworth had 'an eye' to visualise God in every beautiful object of Nature. The serene beauty of the 'Lake District' where he lived made him a 'worshipper of nature'. He believed that nature was alive with a spirit of its own. He expressed his relationship with nature in a very simple language. That is why, his poems speak of 'a man speaking to men'.

## Introduction to the Poem

This beautiful poem was written in 1807. It is one of the well-known poems of William Wordsworth.

'The Solitary Reaper' presents a beautiful scene of Scottish Highland. A peasant girl is singing a melodious song while reaping the crop. The song is echoing in the solitude of the valley. The melody and sweetness of the song touch the poet's heart and make him stand there "motionless". The song resounds in his memory even when it is heard no more.

This is an ordinary experience but the poet mingles 'divinity of nature' with it. Thus the whole experience becomes mystical and exalted.

Using the rhyme scheme – ab ab cc dd, the poet presents a spontaneous flow of lyric. Choicest words have been used to produce romantic atmosphere. Exquisite imagery lends a pictorial quality to the poem.

## Detailed Summary

'The Solitary Reaper' is a very beautiful short lyric written by William Wordsworth. Once the poet was strolling in the Scottish Highlands. Suddenly, he heard a very sweet and sad song. That song was being sung by a simple Scottish peasant girl. She was all alone in the field busy reaping the harvest. She was cutting and binding the grain. The whole valley was overflowing and resounding with the sweetness of her song.

The poet compares her song with the song of a nightingale and a cuckoo-bird. The nightingale's song appears very sweet to the group of tired travellers who have come across the Arabian Desert. The nightingale welcomes them in an oasis and relieves them of their weariness by her sweet song. But the poet says that the song of the girl was more delightful than the song of the nightingale.

Then the poet compares her song with the song of the cuckoo bird. In spring season, a cuckoo bird sings joyfully in the Hebrides Islands. Its voice reaches the far off lands breaking the silence of the seas. But this girl's song is much more melodious.

The poet was a little bit uneasy because he was not able to understand the theme of her song because she sang in a dialect which was foreign to the poet. He was very curious to know the subject matter of the song. Since there was nobody to help him out, he started guessing. Perhaps her song was about some sad happenings of the past. The song might be telling about some battle fought long ago. It was also possible

that the girl sang about some common matters of life. She could have been singing about some natural loss, sorrow or pain which had troubled her or might trouble her again. Whatever might be the subject for her song but music is above all these barriers of language and nationality and touches the heart of the listener.

The poet then stopped guessing about the theme and found that the song seemed to have no ending. The girl was bending over her sickle while reaping the harvest. At the same time, she was continuously singing the song. The poet listened to it as if mesmerised by it and then started climbing the hill. But the sweetness of the song had made a permanent impression on his heart. He could not hear the song but the memory of the song was still resounding in his heart like any other beautiful thing of nature, the song gave him permanent joy.

## Explanation with Reference to the Context

### Stanza 1

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.

Word-Meanings: 1. behold = See!; 2. single = alone; 3. solitary – lonely; 4. lass = girl; 5. reap = to cut the crop; 6. grain = a cereal-corn; 7. melancholy = sad; 8. strain = music, song; 9. vale = valley; 10. profound = deep.

Reference to the Context: These lines have been extracted from the poem 'The Solitary Reaper', written by William Wordsworth. In this poem, the poet describes a lonely girl who is reaping grain in a field and simultaneously singing a sweet and sad song. On hearing the song, the poet is attracted towards it and wants that it should be continued without any disturbance.

Explanation: These are the opening lines of the poem. The poet sees a lonely young girl reaping the harvest in the field. While reaping and binding the grain, she is singing a sad song. The poet advises himself that she should not be disturbed.

If she watches someone, she would stop singing out of shyness or modesty. He feels surprised at the loneliness of the lass. She is all alone in the solitary surroundings and her song is filling the deep valley with sweetness.

So these lines show how aptly the poet sketches the romantic surroundings with the help of words.

### Stanza 2

No Nightingale did ever chant  
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.

Word-Meaning: 1. chant = to sing; 2. welcome = sweet; 3. notes = songs; 3. weary = tired; 4. bands = group; 5. some shady haunt = oasis a shaded place to take rest; 6. thrilling = causing sensation; 7. farthest = distant.

**Reference to the Context:** These lines have been taken from the poem 'The Solitary Reaper' written by William Wordsworth. The poet is spell-bound by the sweet song of a lonely girl who is cutting and binding corn. He compares the song of the reaper with that of a cuckoo bird and a nightingale and finds that her song is the sweetest.

**Explanation:** In these lines, the poet compares the song of the solitary reaper with that of a nightingale. When some tired travellers reach an oasis in the Arabian Desert, the song of the nightingale gives them comfort and happiness.

In the same way, during spring season, a cuckoo bird which sings in the distant Hebrides islands, breaks the silence of the seas. Its thrilling voice echoes over the sea and welcomes the sailors.

But the poet thinks that the song of the girl is better than any other song.

In these lines, the poet takes the help of comparisons and images to prove that the song of the girl had an enchanting effect.

### Stanza 3

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?

**Word-Meanings:** 1. what she sings = what is the theme of her song; 2. plaintive = sad; 3. number = song; 4. far off = distant; 5. lay = song.

**Reference to the Context:** These lines have been taken from the poem 'The Solitary Reaper', written by William Wordsworth. The poet saw a lonely girl singing all alone. Her song left an everlasting impression on his heart. Her song was better than that of even a nightingale or a cuckoo-bird.

**Explanation:** The poet is very curious to know the theme of that sweet song. The girl is singing in a different dialect, and he is not able to understand her language. He starts guessing about the theme.

He thinks that the girl might be singing about some old happenings or ancient battles. He imagines that she might be describing common matters of life in her song.

This is also possible that she might be wondering about the loss or pain that has happened in her life and might happen again.

So, in these lines, the poet desperately asks if anyone could tell him the subject-matter of that sweet and sad song.

### Stanza 4

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 listen'd, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.

**Word-Meanings:** 1. maiden = girl; 2. sickle = a reaping hook; 3. motionless = without any movement; 4. still = calm; 5. mounted = climbed; 5. bore = carried.

**Reference to the Context:** These lines have been extracted from the poem 'The Solitary Reaper', written by William Wordsworth. The poet tells about the enchanting effect of the song of a young girl who is reaping and binding grain. He is not able to understand the language of the song and keeps on guessing the theme of that sad song.

**Explanation:** Unable to guess the theme of the song, the poet again delves deep in the sweetness of the song. Her song was endless. She was bending over the sickle to cut the harvest. Her work continued with her enchanting song. The poet heard the song and was spell bound. He stood there calm and motionless. After sometime, he went away climbing the mountain. Physically, he could not hear the song but the melodious voice had left a permanent impression in his heart. The voice was resounding in his heart.

The poet wishes to say that beautiful things become the source of eternal and permanent joy.