

## 8<sup>th</sup>-lecture

### “The Solitary Reaper”

#### Summary

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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.

The poet orders his listener to behold a “solitary Highland lass” reaping and singing by herself in a field. He says that anyone passing by should either stop here, or “gently pass” so as not to disturb her. As she “cuts and binds the grain” she “sings a melancholy strain,” and the valley overflows with the beautiful, sad sound. The speaker says that the sound is more welcome than any chant of the nightingale to weary travelers in the desert, and that the cuckoo-bird in spring never sang with a voice so thrilling.

Impatient, the poet asks, “Will no one tell me what she sings?” He speculates that her song might be about “old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago,” or that it might be humbler, a simple song about “matter of today.” Whatever she sings about, he says, he listened “motionless and still,” and as he traveled up the hill, he carried her song with him in his heart long after he could no longer hear it.

### **Form**

The four eight-line stanzas of this poem are written in a tight iambic tetrameter. Each follows a rhyme scheme of ABABCCDD, though in the first and last stanzas the “A” rhyme is off (field/self and sang/work).

### **Commentary**

Along with “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” “The Solitary Reaper” is one of Wordsworth’s most famous post-*Lyrical Ballads* lyrics. In “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth said that he was able to look on nature and hear “human music”; in this poem, he writes specifically about real human music encountered in a beloved, rustic setting. The song of the young girl reaping in the fields is incomprehensible to him (a “Highland lass,” she is likely singing in Scots), and what he appreciates is its tone, its expressive beauty, and the mood it creates within him, rather than its explicit content, at which he can only guess. To an extent, then, this poem ponders the limitations of language, as it does in the third stanza (“Will no one tell me what she sings?”). But what it really does is praise the beauty of music and its fluid expressive beauty, the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” that Wordsworth identified at the heart of poetry.

By placing this praise and this beauty in a rustic, natural setting, and by and by establishing as its source a simple rustic girl, Wordsworth acts on the values

of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem's structure is simple—the first stanza sets the scene, the second offers two bird comparisons for the music, the third wonders about the content of the songs, and the fourth describes the effect of the songs on the speaker—and its language is natural and unforced. Additionally, the final two lines of the poem (“Its music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more”) return its focus to the familiar theme of memory, and the soothing effect of beautiful memories on human thoughts and feelings.

“The Solitary Reaper” anticipates Keats’s two great meditations on art, the “Ode to a Nightingale,” in which the speaker steepes himself in the music of a bird in the forest—Wordsworth even compares the reaper to a nightingale—and “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in which the speaker is unable to ascertain the stories behind the shapes on an urn. It also anticipates Keats’s “Ode to Autumn” with the figure of an emblematic girl reaping in the fields.

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- **“The Solitary Reaper” Themes**

“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.

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### Analysis of *The Solitary Reaper*

#### Stanza One

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.

In the First stanza of "The Solitary Reaper," Wordsworth describes how the Reaper was singing all alone. During one of his journeys in the countryside of Scotland, he saw a Highland girl working in the field all alone. She had no one to help her out in the field. So she was singing to herself. She was singing without knowing that someone was listening to her song. The poet doesn't want to disturb her solitude so requests the passer by's go without disturbing her. She was immersed in her work

of cutting and binding while singing a melancholy song. For the poet, he is so struck by the sad beauty of her song that the whole valley seems to overflow with its sound.

### Stanza Two

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 second stanza of “The Solitary Reaper,” the poet compares the young woman’s song with ‘Nightingale’ and ‘Cuckoo’ – the most celebrated birds by the writers and poets for the sweetness of voice. But, here he complains that neither ‘Nightingale’ nor the ‘Cuckoo’ sang a song that is as sweet as hers. He says that no nightingale has sung the song so soothing like that for the weary travelers. For, the song of the girl has stopped him from going about his business. He is utterly enchanted that he says that her voice is so thrilling and penetrable like that of the Cuckoo Bird, which sings to break the silence in the ‘Hebrides’ Islands. He symbolically puts forth that her voice is so melodious and more than that of the two birds, known for their voice.

### Stanza Three

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 third stanza of “The Solitary Reaper,” the poet depicts his plight over not understanding the theme or language of the poem. The poet couldn’t understand the local Scottish dialect in which the reaper was singing. So tries to imagine what the song might be about. Given that it is a ‘*plaintive number*’ and a ‘*melancholy strain*’ (as given in line 6) he speculates that her song might be about some past sorrow, pain or loss ‘*of old, unhappy things*’ or battles fought long ago. Or perhaps, he says, it is a humbler, simpler song about some present sorrow, pain, or loss, a ‘*matter of to-day*.’ He further wonders if that is about something that has happened in the past or something that has reoccurred now.

#### Stanza Four

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.

In the fourth stanza, the poet decides not to probe further into the theme. He comes to the conclusion that whatever may be the theme of her poem, it is not going to end. Not only her song but also her suffering sounds like a never-ending one. He stays there motionless and listened to her song quite some times. Even when he left and mounted up the hill he could still hear her voice coming amongst the produce, she was cutting and binding. Though the poet left that place, the song remained in his heart, long after he heard that song.

### Literary/ Poetic Devices Used

‘The Solitary Reaper’ by William Wordsworth uses a straightforward language and meter as well as natural theme and imagery. Once again Wordsworth reflected his belief in the importance of the natural world. The poem highlights his definition of poetry to be ‘a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ from the poet and the readers’ part.

### Rhyme scheme

The poem’s 32 lines are equally distributed among the four stanzas. Each stanza follows the rhyme scheme: ABABCCDD. Use of end rhymes, such as “profound/sound”, “still/hill”, “lay/day” and “grain/strain” makes the poem melodious.

### Apostrophe



The poem “The Solitary Reaper” begins with an Apostrophe “Behold” where the poet addresses the unknown passersby. He uses it again in the seventh line “O Listen” telling them how the valley is filled with the sound of her.

### Symbolism/ Metaphor

The poet makes a symbolic comparison of the young woman’s song with Nightingale and Cuckoo bird for the melodious nature of her song. But it turns out to be hyperbole for he exaggerates that her song is better than theirs. The poet very much captivated by her song that the valley is “*overflowing with the sound*”. Again, he says that the song looked like a never-ending as her sorrows.

### Rhetorical questions

The rhetorical question helps to make the point clear. For example, Wordsworth used “Will no one tell me what she sings?”, “That has been, and may be again?” and “Familiar matter of to-day?” it to express his curiosity over the theme and meaning of the song, the girl sang.

### Imagery

The imagery used in a literary work enables the readers to perceive things involving their five senses. For example, “Reaping and singing by herself”, “I saw her singing at her work” and “More welcome notes to weary bands” gives a pictorial description of the young woman at work. He makes the readers visualize what he has seen and how he felt.

