

# Poetry

# UNIT

## P. 3 The Solitary Reaper

by William Wordsworth

1. Sometimes we see something beautiful and striking, and we remember it for a long time afterwards. Can you recollect this ever happening to you? If so, what was it? What do you remember about it now? Are the details of what you saw or the feelings you experienced at that time fresh in your mind? Think for a few minutes, then share your thoughts with the class.
2. Listen to one of William Wordsworth's poems, that describes a memorable experience he had while out on a walk. (Your teacher will play a recording.) Listen to the poem at least twice.
3. Now read the poem.

Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary **Highland lass!**  
**Reaping** and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!

5. 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 chant  
10 More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of Travellers in some shady haunt.  
Among **Arabian Sands**



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**highland lass:** a girl who lives in the highlands (mountain regions) of Scotland  
**reaping:** cutting down and gathering a crop such as corn or rice  
**melancholy strain:** sad song  
**vale profound:** deep valley  
**Arabian Sands:** the deserts of Arabia (the Middle East)



A voice so thrilling ne' er was heard  
 In spring-time from the cuckoo-bird.  
 15 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,  
 20 And battles long ago:

Or is it some more **humble** lay,  
 Familiar matter of to-day ?  
 Same natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
 that has been, and may be again ?

25 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  
 30 And, as I mounted up the hill,  
 The Music in my heart I bore,  
 Long after it was heard no more.



### About the Poet

*William Wordsworth was born on 7th April 1770, in Cockermouth in the Lake District, England. When many poets still wrote about ancient heroes in grandiloquent style, Wordsworth focussed on nature, children, the poor, common people and used ordinary words to express his feelings. He defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" arising from "emotions recollected in tranquility". He died at Rydal Mount on April 23, 1850.*

4. **Imagine that you are the poet, William Wordsworth. You continue on your walk, and when you reach home you tell a friend what you saw and felt. Which of the following best describes your experience? (Work in pairs, then have a class discussion.)**

**farthest Hebrides:** the most remote group of islands that lie to the north-west of Scotland

**plaintive numbers:** sad music

**humble lay:** ordinary song

**sickle:** a tool for cutting grass and grain crops. It has a short handle and a blade shaped like a hook.



- a) "I was walking past some fields when I saw a young girl, a farm worker, harvesting grain by hand, with a sickle. She was so beautiful that I stood out of sight and watched her for a long time. I have never seen anyone more gorgeous! In fact, she reminded me of other beautiful experiences I've had - the song of the nightingale or the cuckoo, for instance. I'd certainly like to see her again!"
- b) "As I was standing on the hill top just now, I heard a very sad and plaintive song. I looked down, and saw a young woman reaping grain, singing as she did so. She seemed very melancholy as she sang. But somehow her song brought great comfort and joy to me. In fact, I found it a very emotional experience. As I continued my walk along the hill top, I also heard a nightingale and a cuckoo. But the young farm worker's song affected me most deeply, even though I couldn't understand the words."
- c) "Just now, as I was walking in the valley, I saw a young farm worker in the field. She was singing to herself as she worked. I was so affected by her singing, that I stopped and listened. She had a beautiful voice, which seemed to fill the whole valley. The song was a sad one, and I couldn't understand the words. But its plaintive tone and melancholy sound touched me greatly, and its beauty reminded me of the song of a nightingale or a cuckoo. After some time. I walked up the hill, carrying the memory of the young woman's song with me."

5. ***The poet could not understand the words of the song, yet he raised several possibilities about its theme. In the diagram below are some of these possibilities. Read the third stanza again, and find the phrase that matches each. Copy and complete the diagram, writing each phrase in the empty boxes. Work in pairs.***

death or illness of  
a loved one

---

everyday, routine  
events

---

What is the theme of  
the solitary reaper's song?

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a disaster or calamity in  
the past

---

an important historical  
event

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6. **On the basis of your understanding of the poem, answer the following questions by ticking the correct choice.**

- (a) The central idea of the poem 'The Solitary Reaper' is \_\_\_\_\_.
- (i) well sung songs give us happiness
  - (ii) melodious sounds appeal to all
  - (iii) beautiful experiences give us life-long pleasure
  - (iv) reapers can sing like birds
- (b) In the poem '*The Solitary Reaper*' to whom does the poet say '*Stop here or gently pass*'?
- (i) to the people cutting corn
  - (ii) to himself
  - (iii) to the people who make noise
  - (iv) to all the passers by
- (c) 'The Solitary Reaper' is a narrative poem set to music. This form of verse is called a \_\_\_\_\_.
- (i) ballad
  - (ii) soliloquy
  - (iii) monologue
  - (iv) sonnet
- (d) The poet's lament in the poem 'The Solitary Reaper' is that \_\_\_\_\_.
- (i) he cannot understand the song
  - (ii) he did not know the lass
  - (iii) she stopped singing at once
  - (iv) he had to move away
- (e) The setting of the poem is \_\_\_\_\_.
- (i) Arabia
  - (ii) Hebrides
  - (iii) Scotland
  - (iv) England



7.a) Read the second stanza again, in which Wordsworth compares the solitary reaper's song with the song of the nightingale and the cuckoo. On the basis of your reading (and your imagination), copy and complete the table below. (Work in groups of four, then have a brief class discussion.)

	Place	Heard by	Impact on listener
Solitary Reaper	Scottish Highlands	the poet	holds him spellbound
Nightingale			
Cuckoo			

- b) Why do you think Wordsworth has chosen the song of the nightingale and the cuckoo, for comparison with the solitary reaper's song?
- c) As you read the second stanza, what pictures come to your mind? Be ready to describe them in your own words, to the rest of the class. (Do not be afraid to go beyond what the poet has written.)

8. In the sixth line of the first stanza, we read:

**"... and sings a melancholy strain,..."**

This "s" sound at the beginning of sings and strain has been repeated. Poets often do this. Do you know why? Do you know what this "poetic repetition" is called? Can you find other instances of this, in **The Solitary Reaper**?

9. In the first stanza, some words or phrases have been used to show that the girl working in the fields is alone. Which are those words and phrases? What effect do they create in the mind of the reader?
10. Wordsworth was so moved by this experience that later he wrote this poem. Think back in your own life and try to recall an experience that affected you greatly and left a deep impact on you. Then write a poem for your school magazine in which you describe that experience and its impact.

