

# Preface to the Lyrical Ballads



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

William Wordsworth was born in a raised in the scenic English Lake District, a rural paradise. His love for nature most likely came about as a result of this upbringing. Wordsworth attended St. John's College, Cambridge University and took his degree without distinction. He spent a year in France (November 1791 to December 1792) after completing his studies and became an ardent supporter of the French Revolution. During this time, he fell in love with a Frenchwoman, Annette Vallon, and fathered a daughter, Caroline, with her. Lack of money forced him to return to England and war prevented him from rejoining his lover and child. This, combined with his disillusionment with the Revolution, led Wordsworth to the verge of an emotional breakdown. At this critical time, a friend died and left Wordsworth enough money to live by writing poetry. In 1795, he moved to Dorsetshire with his sister, Dorothy, befriended poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and began his own poetic career at the age of 27. A short period of collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge led to the publication of one of the most important books of the time: *Lyrical Ballads*. Over the years, he grew increasingly prosperous and famous, but settled into a religious and political conservatism that disappointed readers, like William Hazlitt, who once thought of him as a promoter of democratic change. By 1843, Wordsworth was poet laureate of Great Britain. He died in 1850 at the ripe age of eighty, and famed poet Alfred Lord Tennyson succeeded him as poet laureate.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth wrote the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” during a time where England was experiencing profound urbanization, industrialization, and movement towards mass media and mass culture. In the essay, Wordsworth expresses fear that these factors can lead human minds to become dull, and thus advocates a poetic revolution. At the same time, Wordsworth is careful to say that poetry, though passionate, should still be the product of prior thought and acquired skill. His disappointment with the French Revolution a decade prior to writing the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” turned him away from the idea of thoughtless passion—emotions ought to be recollected and processed “in tranquility” prior to being expressed.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

“Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” is an introduction to Wordsworth’s poetry collection, *Lyrical Ballads*, as well as a

manifesto for the Romantic movement in England. In the process of composing the essay, Wordsworth had frequent conversations with Wordsworth’s close friend and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who also contributed a few poems of his own to *Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge is most well-known for his long poem [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#), but also penned shorter poems like “The Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.” Some of the ideas in “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” had antecedents in the late eighteenth century, but on the whole, the preface is a rather revolutionary manifesto regarding about the essence of poetry. The essay’s discussion of the valid language of poetry follows the lead of chapters 14 and 17 of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*—both Romantic poets attack the lofty diction of the Neoclassical poets. In his essay, Wordsworth also criticizes contemporary Gothic novels and German melodramas. For him, such unimaginative and sensational literature threatens the acuity of the human mind. William Wordsworth’s sister, Dorothy, was also a Romantic poet and kept journals (*The Grasmere Journal* and *The Alfoxden Journal*) detailing her daily life, which often included spending time with Coleridge and William in nature.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Preface to the Lyrical Ballads
- **When Written:** 1800-1802
- **Where Written:** Grasmere, England
- **When Published:** 1800 (2nd ed.), 1802 (3rd ed.)
- **Literary Period:** Romantic
- **Genre:** Essay, Manifesto
- **Antagonist:** Late-Neoclassical writers
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Decline with Age.** Wordsworth wrote prolifically throughout his life, but it appeared that after 1807, his poetic sensibility declined. Scholars have debated the reason for this decline. Some say that most of his poetry is based on the remembrance and reinterpretation of things he experienced as a youth, and memories of these experiences hardly forms an inexhaustible source for poetic inspiration.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Over the years, Wordsworth’s “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” has come to be seen as a manifesto for the Romantic movement in England. In it, Wordsworth explains why he wrote

his experimental ballads the way he did. Unlike the highbrow poetry of his contemporaries, the late-Neoclassical writers, Wordsworth's poems in *Lyrical Ballads* engage with the lives of the peasantry and are written in stripped-down, common language.

Wordsworth was alone in his effort; he penned the *Lyrical Ballads* with the help of his good friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. With friends like Coleridge, Wordsworth hopes to produce a new class of poetry, which will focus on "low and rustic life"—Wordsworth finds that the common people are less restrained and more honest because they are in constant communion with the beauty of nature. This new class of poetry will also use the language of the common people, as this language carries a certain universality and permanence, having none of the fickleness of poetic diction.

Wordsworth feels that much of the poetry of his contemporaries is far too trivial and crude, relying on sensationalism to appeal to readers. This sort of poetry—along with modern industrialization and urbanization—dulls the minds of readers. To Wordsworth, good poetry should have a purpose other than superficial entertainment. The purpose of Wordsworth's ballads is to allow cosmopolitan readers to vicariously experience nature so that they can be revived from the mind-dulling aspects of modernity.

Wordsworth also sees great importance in emotions. Indeed, in poetry, emotions are more important than the plot and actions—he writes that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of emotion" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." It is important that the poet recollects his emotions in tranquility, as taking this time to contemplate the experience allows the poet to incorporate not only passion, but also profound thought in their work. Poetry ought to be a profound experience. Wordsworth disdains the trivialization of poetry: no matter how simple the meter of a poem, the contents of the poem still ought to be taken seriously by poet and reader alike.

Other than these larger ideas about poetry, Wordsworth also briefly digresses into the importance of meter. Wordsworth relates that he has chosen to write poetry and not prose because meter adds a certain charm to the work. Furthermore, the regularity of meter can help temper emotions that may grow to be too much if the work were written with the stylistic freedom of prose. Wordsworth ends the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" on the note that there is nothing more he can do except allow the reader to experience his ballads for themselves.

the foremost founders of English Romanticism, is the author and narrator of the essay "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads." Through the essay, Wordsworth criticizes the literature of Neoclassical writers and declares the principles and aims of the Romantic movement. Wordsworth disdains both the early to mid-Neoclassical writers' emphasis on decorum, as well as the late-Neoclassical writers' penchant for sensationalism, which, he argues, leads to artificiality and dulling of the mind. For Wordsworth, the remedy for these trends lies in returning to nature and the "rustic" life and language of the peasantry, as well as getting in touch with one's emotions as an aesthetic experience. Born and brought up in a poor part of the English Lake District, Wordsworth admired the working class and disdained hierarchical social order. He believed that the purity and sincerity of a simpler life helps humans stay human; thus, he wrote ballads that allowed readers to vicariously experience this invigorating simplicity. Furthermore, though Wordsworth believed poetry to be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," he is also known for his emphasis on "recollecting emotions in tranquility," so as to prevent the poet from writing in a state of emotional excess. As a young man, he had enthusiastically witnessed the upheavals of the French Revolution, only to have been bitterly disappointed by its effects. This experience led him to perceive a need for balancing the passionate emotions with calm contemplation. Consequently, readers can perceive that Wordsworth's poetry is filled with not only deep feeling but also profound thought.

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge** – Wordsworth introduces Samuel Taylor Coleridge as "a Friend" who contributed several poems—*The Ancient Mariner*, "The Foster Mother's Tale," "The Nightingale," "The Dungeon," and "Love"—to *Lyrical Ballads*, and who shares the same Romantic tendency: their "opinions on the subject of poetry do almost entirely coincide." Coleridge helped Wordsworth launch the Romantic era in English literature; indeed, the two poets' names are often linked together, along with Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy Wordsworth. The companionship of Coleridge was a major source of encouragement and inspiration for Wordsworth in terms of writing the *Lyrical Ballads* and its accompanying preface.

**Late-Neoclassical Writers** – According to Wordsworth, these writers diverted public interest from the "invaluable works" of writers like Shakespeare and Milton to their own "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse." The late-Neoclassical writers relied on sensationalism, artifice, and stylistic excess to hold readers' interest. Wordsworth believes that the works of these writers have dulled the minds of many readers.

**The Peasantry** – Wordsworth considered the thoughts, feelings, and language of the peasantry to be ideal for poetry. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, he depicts "low and rustic life" because he believes the thoughts of the peasantry are less restrained, more communicative, more easily comprehended, and more



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**William Wordsworth** – William Wordsworth, a poet and one of

enduring “because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” In other words, the thoughts of these working-class peasants are more sincere and pure because they are in daily contact with nature. Furthermore, their language, consisting of “simple and unelaborated expressions,” is also ideal for poetry as “a language arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language” than the artificial language of the late-Neoclassical poets. Wordsworth uses working-class language because it is more in tune with reality and “the sympathies of men.”

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Cosmopolitan Readers** – Cosmopolitan readers are at once the subject of and the audience to the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.” They are the ones whose minds are being dulled by late-Neoclassical writers and industrialization, and they are the ones Wordsworth hopes to revive through his nature-centered ballads.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### ROMANTICISM VS. NEOCLASSICISM

The “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” is, at its core, a manifesto of the Romantic movement.

Wordsworth uses this essay to declare the tenets of Romantic poetry, which has distinctly different preoccupations from the Neoclassical poetry of the preceding period. The Neoclassical poets emphasized intellectualism over emotion, society, didacticism, formality, and stylistic rigidity. The last stage of Neoclassicism, before the onset of Romanticism, is known as the Age of Johnson. In this last stage, writers attempted to break from the classical tradition through gestures like incorporating nature and melancholy, but were, in Wordsworth's eyes, unsuccessful. Wordsworth proposes something more revolutionary in his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”: emotion and imagination over intellectualism, nature over society, simple forms of expression, and the stylistic liberty of the poet. Through his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth argues that it's time for a new kind of poetry—one that can revive humankind to be emotionally alive and morally sensitive—which he hopes to catalyze with his own ballads.

Wordsworth sees great harm in the poetry of the Age of Johnson. The poets of this age have attempted to break from Neoclassicism, but their poetry displays an unforgivable

insensitivity and sensationalism. Wordsworth notes that there appears to be “a craving for extraordinary incident” among the general public for his time, and “the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves” to this taste: “The invaluable works of our elder writers [...] are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.” Writers from the Age of Johnson have attempted to incorporate certain characteristics of Romanticism but have created works that are overwrought and lacking in insight. From Wordsworth's critique of these writers, readers of the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” can infer that Wordsworth believes writers should be sensitive to emotions but should not dramatize these emotions so that they become artificial.

Nevertheless, the decline of literature has not led Wordsworth to be hopeless. The poet declares, “I should be oppressed with no dishonorable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it which are equally inherent and indestructible.” In other words, Wordsworth believes that the decline from the Age of Johnson can be counteracted by “certain powers” that can revive the human mind—namely, the powers of Romanticism. Wordsworth wishes to guide his readers to the “fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature,” to guide his readers back to their natural sensitivity.

In the introductory paragraphs of the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth declares that by publishing the *Lyrical Ballads* four years ago in 1798, he was conducting an experiment to see if people would accept a new class of poetry. Since these poems were well-received, Wordsworth decided to write the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” to give readers insight into why he wrote such experimental poems. In these poems, Wordsworth has attempted to “[fit] to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation.” By writing these poems, Wordsworth intends not only to impart pleasure, but also to produce a class of poetry “well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity, and in the quality of its moral relations.” From this, readers can see that Wordsworth had two main goals in mind: 1) to create poems that appeal not only to well-educated readers but also to the “multiplicity,” or general public, and 2) to have these poems be relevant to humanity's “moral relations,” inspiring readers to have humane conduct. Aware that his poems are “so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed”—in other words, the poetry that is popular at the time of his writing—Wordsworth emphasizes that his poetic digression from Neoclassicism is not the product “of an indolence which prevents him from endeavouring to ascertain what is his duty.” Instead, Wordsworth wants to exclude “certain classes of ideas

and expressions” in Neoclassical poetry that, to him, are demonstrate an artificial “gaudiness and inane phraseology.” Wordsworth emphasizes that his decision to write in a simpler, less-rigid style than the Neoclassicists does not arise from laziness, but from dislike for their lofty phrases. Wordsworth finds the Neoclassical style to be too flashy and rather senseless.

Neoclassicism, in its dedication to intellectualism and other lofty ideas, seems heartless to Wordsworth. Poets in the Age of Johnson who attempted to diverge from earlier classes of Neoclassicism failed to produce better literature and instead fell into the trap of sensationalism. Romanticism is something wholly revolutionary, and, according to Wordsworth, has the potential to revive the public back to sensitivity.



### ORDINARY LIFE AND EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

Throughout his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth emphasizes the importance of

depicting ordinary life using everyday language in a poem. According to Wordsworth, using ordinary life as subject matter allows the poet to better explore human nature and reveal truth. This simple, prose-like language not only corresponds well with ordinary life—it’s closer to the way that normal, everyday people speak—but also is more universally intelligible: its simplicity and honesty create a sense of permanence, making it accessible for readers across time and place.

In order to show why his method of tackling ordinary subjects through ordinary language is so important and impactful, Wordsworth reveals the pitfalls of not using that approach. He suggests that poets who don’t rely on ordinary language “separate themselves from the sympathies of men.” To Wordsworth, a poet must be close to their reader and pull that reader in—a poet who tries to fluff up his or her poem with jargon or lofty language alienates the reader and has trouble connecting to their lived experience. In addition, veering away from ordinary life and plain language means that poems may be less enduring. Wordsworth argues that many poets “indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.” While poems centering around everyday life and expressed through simple language will live on, poems that don’t do those things will essentially only have fifteen minutes of fame. Wordsworth also points out that he’s “abstained from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad Poets till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower.” Here, Wordsworth is explaining how certain words and phrases, though they may sound beautiful, can grow stale and trite over the years—so much so, that even the best poet can’t “overpower” the sour, spoiled flavor those words and phrases

have taken on.

Wordsworth argues that what makes common scenes from ordinary life so impactful in poetry is that they speak clearly to human nature and are also enduring. Wordsworth makes it clear that his “principal object” is “to choose incidents and situations from common life [...] and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination [...] and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them [...] the primary laws of our nature.” Wordsworth wishes to depict ordinary things—albeit in an interesting way through using his imagination—so that his readers may better understand human nature. Along these lines, Wordsworth claims that “low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language.” Wordsworth believes that there is a certain degree of universality to rural life: things are “more easily comprehended” because they are “more durable.” In other words, rural life is the most easily relatable and timeless.

Wordsworth also emphasizes that he wants to use “a selection of language really used by men”—that is, language that mirrors the way everyday people (the peasantry) talk as they go about their lives—because of its purity and universality. For Wordsworth, society has corrupted language. Instead of buying into the lofty language and rigid poetic forms that society deems proper, Wordsworth chooses to use the stripped-down, ordinary language of a commoner. He explains that common people speak more truthfully because they aren’t swayed by “social vanity,” and it is this unadorned truth—the “simple and unelaborated expressions” of everyday people—that Wordsworth is after. Furthermore, Wordsworth claims that “such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets.” Not only is everyday language truer, it’s also more enduring. To Wordsworth, everyday language means that it’s stripped bare of the poetic devices that many believe to be part and parcel to poetry. He writes: “Except in a very few instances the Reader will find no personifications of abstract ideas.” Although personification has its place in certain poems, Wordsworth doesn’t rely on the device because his goal is “to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men, and I do not find that such personifications make any regular or natural part of that language.” Along the same lines, Wordsworth also avoids excessively poetic diction. He explains, “I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it; this I have done [...] to bring my language near to the language of men.” That Wordsworth has tried just as hard to filter out that which other poets try so hard to infuse into their poems emphasizes just how serious Wordsworth is about reflecting everyday life with the language to match.

Towards the middle of his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth writes, “I wish to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him.” While Wordsworth means that readers won’t find many instances of personification or lofty, abstract ideas floating around in the ensuing ballads, his statement here also speaks to his overarching goal: to write in plain, unadorned language about everyday people and things—“flesh and blood”—in order to convey the human experience in a way that is true and enduring.



## POETRY AND EMOTIONS

Emotions are of utmost importance to Wordsworth when it comes to poetry. “For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful

feelings,” he writes in his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.” However, Wordsworth is careful to point out that depicting emotion requires prior thought and acquired skill on the part of the poet. The poet should be able to successfully observe and depict the thoughts and feelings that people have when they are in “a state of excitement,” meaning the stimulation people experience in a given situation. In this way, when a poet successfully composes a poem, that poem should have a noticeable effect on its reader, as it is relatable. In the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth argues that in order to compose a successful and impactful poem, the poet must immerse themselves in a sort of process for poetic creation, which includes observing the subject matter, recollecting his or her emotions, contemplating those emotions, reviving those emotions in a composition, and, finally, enjoying the pleasure that his or her poetry creates.

For Wordsworth, a worthy poet must be able to convey his or her own emotional sensibility to the reader. Wordsworth claims that emotions and thoughts are strongly intertwined: “For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feeling.” The poet must be able to understand this connection, as someone who often thinks of the relationship between thoughts and feelings will become more emotionally sensitive and aware. Then, when one such sensitive person communicates his or her thoughts, the listener, “if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.” In other words, when a poet successfully communicates their emotions, readers will be vicariously enlightened. Because the poet is tasked with successfully conveying that “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” to his or her readers, the poet must engage in a process that allows him or her to find the right words to express himself or herself. But first, the poet must be uncommonly aware of emotions: the poet needs to have “a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among

mankind.” Such a sensibility allows the poet to “slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with [those of the people he describes].” In this way, a poet must be a sharp observer and must be able to contemplate and process the emotions that came with his or her observations.

The Wordsworthian poet ought to recollect their emotions “in tranquility” so that what he or she composes will not be momentary, but timeless. Wordsworth claims that “the poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner.” The purpose of this is so that the poet can better communicate their thoughts and feelings to others: “in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves.” The Wordsworthian process for poetic creation involves not just contemplating emotions “in tranquility,” but contemplating those emotions until “by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.” In other words, the poet should calmly process the emotions he or she initially experienced without distraction, until he or she feels in touch with those emotions again. Then, the poet may begin composing. This process allows the poet to create a distance between the initial emotion and the reader, in a way that tempers “the painful feeling which will always be found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions,” and thus leads to greater pleasure. The process for poetic creation has so refined the poet’s composition, Wordsworth adds, that it will carry an enduring rather than momentary pleasure for its readers.

For Wordsworth, the essence of poetry comes in the form of a profound rendering of emotions, which helps the reader understand themselves better. As Wordsworth writes in his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” the important thing is “that the feeling therein developed [in a poem] gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling”—poetry, in Wordsworth’s eyes, hinges on emotion even more so than the actual event or situation it’s describing.



## POETRY, NATURE, AND HUMANITY

At the beginning of the 19th century, when Wordsworth was writing, England was moving towards industry and urbanity. Wordsworth believed that this sort of fast-paced, crowded lifestyle caused people’s minds to grow numb. Wordsworth wrote not for himself, but for the sake of his contemporaries, whose minds he believed were dull. He felt the need to use the subject of nature in his poetry in order to keep his readers emotionally alive and morally sensitive. He saw nature as the solution to the harms of urban life, and, thus, chose to center his *Lyrical Ballads* around

experiences in nature. In his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth highlights that his nature-centered poems have a “worthy purpose” in their potential to reverse the effects of urban life and revive dull minds: his poetry allows people to vicariously experience the profound joys of nature and be revived. In response to urbanization, he felt the need to create poetry that would be “well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations”—in other words, Wordsworth argues that his poetry can help keep humans human by bringing them back to nature.

In his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth highlights how his nature-centered poetry has the power to turn people away from urbanity and industrialization, which he believes dull people’s minds. At the time of Wordsworth’s writing, the Industrial Revolution had recently transformed Britain: people migrated to the city and factories began to appear. Furthermore, Europe was in political upheaval and people were falling for propagandic messages. Wordsworth was bitterly disappointed by the result of the French Revolution and did not want England to follow after France. In general, Wordsworth disliked this trend towards urbanity, industry, mass media, and mass culture: the numbing of the mind arises as the result of “great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of information hourly gratifies.” In Wordsworth’s eyes, these aspects of society have led people to develop bad taste—they craved the instant gratification and revolution rather than profound joy and peace. This bad taste can be seen in his disdainful reference to contemporary Gothic novels and German melodramas: “The invaluable works of our elder writers [...] are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.” Wordsworth is eager to show that “the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants” by creating a new class of more profound, natural literary enjoyment.

Wordsworth’s solution to mind-dulling urbanization is to bring people back to nature through poetry: nature-centered poetry allows people to vicariously experience the simple, unadulterated joys of the countryside. In his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth explains that the time is ripe for his ballads, which will orient readers toward nature. He writes: “It has therefore appeared to me that to endeavor to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day.” In other words, Wordsworth thinks that the curative powers of nature-centered poetry are timeless and applicable to any generation but are especially potent for his age. The *Lyrical Ballads*

represents a “species of poetry [...] which is genuine poetry,” that “give[s] other enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature.” For Wordsworth, nature-centered literature can be the antidote for depravity because such literature allows people who live in depraved societies to vicariously travel to a place of nature and tranquility and experience the purity of the “rustic” human experience. The “purer, more lasting, and more exquisite” joy that his nature-centered poetry brings forms a stark contrast to the “gross and violent” stimulation that urban life and sensational literature bring. Indeed, Wordsworth views nature to be the one of the most important subjects with which a poet can engage. He writes that “there is still left open to me what confessedly constitutes the most valuable object of all writing whether in prose or verse, [...] the entire world of nature.” For the poet, nature “[supplies] endless combinations of form and imagery”—nature is both a valuable topic and a source of abundant inspiration. The pleasure of urban life and sensational literature is temporary and quickly depleted, leading people to seek stimulants that are still more “gross and violent”; the joy of nature, by contrast, is lasting and bountiful.

For Wordsworth, urban life and sensational literature has brought on the moral decline of humanity, and the best way to counter this is to bring people back to nature using Romantic poetry. In his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth preps his reader to vicariously experience a stroll through the countryside, a quiet moment perched atop a cliff, or a sunset by the sea, all by reading one of Wordsworth’s ballads in the pages ahead. These nature-centered poems, Wordsworth argues, will not only revive readers and refresh their tired minds, but will also serve as a lasting source of joy.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## POETRY’S TEARS AND BLOOD

In the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth personifies poetry and speaks of her tears and blood, using them to represent the idea that poetry should be written in the language of the common people. He writes: “Poetry sheds no tears ‘such as Angels weep,’ but natural and human tears; she can boast no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.” Poetry’s tears and blood represent the essence of poetic language—according to Wordsworth, poetic language is merely the language of the common people, and not the lofty thing that the late-Neoclassical writers have made it out to be. Instead of “celestial Ichor”—the blood-like substance thought to run through the

gods' veins—poetry bleeds real, human blood. This ties into Wordsworth's aim in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" to "keep [his] Reader in the company of flesh and blood"—to use stripped-down, common, prose-like language and write about real life ("Low and rustic life") as the masses experience it. Through this metaphor with the tears of poetry, Wordsworth demystified poetry, demonstrating that it is human and not sublime; consequently, poetic language ought to be down-to-earth instead of lofty.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the CreateSpace edition of *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* published in 2016.

### Preface to the Lyrical Ballads Quotes

Several of my Friends are anxious for the success of these Poems from a belief, that if the views, with which they were composed, were indeed realized, a class of Poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity and in the quality of its moral relations [...].

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), Cosmopolitan Readers, Samuel Taylor Coleridge

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 2

#### Explanation and Analysis



Near the beginning of the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth relates that he and several friends wish to produce a new genre of poetry. This genre would contain emotion-driven, nature-centered poems like those in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth and his friends—including Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge—believe that if the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* are well received, then there is a high chance that their poetic revolution will succeed as well. The Romantic poets have high hopes for this new genre of poetry and believe that it should be "well adapted to interest mankind permanently." In other words, they hope that their poetry will hold timeless appeal and write with that goal in mind. Furthermore, the Romantic poets intend for their work to be "not unimportant in the multiplicity": they intend for their work to appeal not only to the literati (well-educated people with an interest in literature), but to the literate masses in general.

The final characteristic that the Romantic poets attribute to

their poetry relates to "the quality of its moral relations." During Wordsworth's time, many late-Neoclassical poets were writing purely dramatic works. In the eyes of Wordsworth and his Romantic colleagues, these dramatic works lead readers to become insensitive to the beauty of common life. In this way, readers become corrupted. The Romantic poets hope that their nature-centered poetry will revive these corrupted readers back to sensitivity and moral goodness.

The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), The Peasantry

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 4



#### Explanation and Analysis

Wordsworth states that his foremost goal is to portray common life in an interesting way. The fact that his goal is considered to be revolutionary at the beginning of the 19th century implies that at the time, poets mostly portrayed the dramatic and spectacular—the sensational. This trend of sensationalism most likely arose from the conception that, for whatever reason, common life is unworthy of portrayal. Contrary to the other poets, Wordsworth believes that common life can be an immensely interesting subject for poetry. Wordsworth believes in tracing the incidents of common life "truly though not ostentatiously": he aims to be honest, choosing to write in a truthful rather than attention-seeking way.

Wordsworth attempts to depict common life in an interesting way by following "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement." When someone encounters or thinks of something exciting, there will be accompanying emotions of excitement before they even think through their experience. Wordsworth's principal object is to capture this process in his poetry.

●● For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 6



### Explanation and Analysis

The first clause of this passage—“For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”—is one of the most widely quoted phrases from the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.” At the time Wordsworth was writing, such a statement was revolutionary: many people, especially the late-Neoclassical poets, generally considered poetry to be an intellectual experience rather than an emotional one. Furthermore, people generally thought of poetry as rigid, regimented, and highly stylized—far from the “spontaneous overflow” that Wordsworth describes.

The latter part of this passage, though quoted less frequently, is just as important. Wordsworth is far from suggesting that all a poet needs to write is an emotional experience. The poet needs to have “possessed of more than usual organic sensibility,” meaning that the poet must be highly observant and perceptive during the initial emotional experience. Moreover, the poet also needs to have “thought long and deeply,” meaning that the poet must carefully contemplate their experience before putting it into words.

●● [...] it is proper that I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), Late-Neoclassical Writers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 9


### Explanation and Analysis

Wordsworth’s poetry differs from “the popular Poetry of the day” in many ways: his poetry focuses on common life

while popular poetry focuses on sensational dramas; his poetry uses common language while popular poetry uses lofty language and “poetic diction.” In this passage, Wordsworth gives another, less immediately noticeable way his poetry is different from popular poetry: “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling.” In other words, emotions, rather than plot, are the most critical aspect to Wordsworth’s poetry. Many popular poets rely on a dazzling plot to generate excitement in the reader; for these poets, the action of the poem is most important, and emotions underpinning that action are only a byproduct. On the other hand, Wordsworth relies on the emotions that his poetry generates to make the plot meaningful, rather than the other way around. Indeed, in many of his ballads, the plot is simple, and may be utterly banal were it not for the colorful emotions that Wordsworth paints into an otherwise skeletal sketch.

●● For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), Cosmopolitan Readers, Late-Neoclassical Writers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

Wordsworth believes that many aspects to modernity are dulling the minds of humankind. Of course, there are the sensational works written by late-Neoclassical authors—superficial and lacking in purpose, they are rendering readers and theatergoers less sensitive to the profound beauty of nature. Wordsworth also references a “multitude of causes unknown to former times,” referring to the urbanization and industrialization of society that was unfolding while Wordsworth was writing.



During the latter half of the 18th century, increase in trade and business catalyzed the Industrial Revolution in Britain. With this technological progress, people began to crave instant gratification. Wordsworth believes that this sort of craving “[unfits the mind] for all voluntary exertion”—people were no longer willing to think and were losing their imagination. Furthermore, desire for instant gratification



"[reduces the mind] to a state of almost savage torpor," meaning that the mind becomes dull and lacking in necessary human sensitivity. Wordsworth's use of the words "savage torpor" conveys that he believes humankind is regressing, which is contrary to the general belief that the Industrial Revolution allowed humankind to progress.

Except in a very few instances the Reader will find no personifications of abstract ideas in these volumes, not that I mean to censure such personifications: they may be well fitted for certain sorts of composition, but in these Poems I propose to myself to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men, and I do not find that such personifications make any regular or natural part of that language. I wish to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), Cosmopolitan Readers, The Peasantry, Late-Neoclassical Writers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 12


### Explanation and Analysis

Poets during Wordsworth's time, especially the late-Neoclassical poets, often personified abstract ideas or used elaborate similes and metaphors. This was viewed as the "poetic" and proper way to write. In this passage, Wordsworth declares that he refrains from these poetic gestures not because he "[means] to censure such personifications," as "they may be well fitted for certain sorts of composition," but because he feels that common people neither speak nor write this way. In other words, personifications of abstract ideas are neither "regular" nor "natural" in the real world. Wordsworth wants to keep his "Reader in the company of flesh and blood" rather than in the company of lofty, intangible ideas, as he is "persuaded that by so doing [he] shall interest him." This addendum suggests that Wordsworth does not use the personification of abstract ideas in the *Lyrical Ballads* because he finds them uninteresting and unfit for the sort of poetry he is writing. Wordsworth wants the appeal of his poetry to stem from its honesty and accurate portrayal of common life.

Poetry sheds no tears "such as Angels weep," but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), Late-Neoclassical Writers

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wordsworth emphasizes that poetry and prose aren't as different as they may seem at first glance. During Wordsworth's time, poets often believed that poetry should be written in a sort of sublime poetic language, different from the worldly, down-to-earth language of prose. Being the revolutionary that he is, Wordsworth dedicates a section in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" to explaining why he believes poetry and prose should be written in essentially the same language. To prove his point, he quotes a sonnet by John Gray where the verses in "prosaic" language are much more effective than the verses in what is traditionally considered poetic language.

Wordsworth finishes this section with the passage above. In these closing sentences, he paints a vivid personification of poetry as a weeping woman. She "sheds no tears 'such as Angels weep,' but natural and human tears." In other words, poetry is not a creature of the sublime but a woman belonging to the human world. Poetry does not have "celestial Ichor"—the fluid that, according to Greek mythology, flows in the veins of gods and goddesses—but human blood, just like prose does. Poetry is human, as she should be considering her human creators and human readers.

Now the co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed when in an unexcited or a less excited state, cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), Cosmopolitan Readers

**Related Themes:** 



**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

In the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth spends much time explaining why he writes poetry in the language of prose. Consequently, he also finds it necessary to explain why he bothers to write poetry at all instead of prose. The answer lies in meter. On one hand, metered language can be more charming to the reader than unmetered language. On the other hand, as seen in the passage above, meter better suits Wordsworth’s purpose: meter can alleviate any negative emotions that poetry may produce in the reader. Wordsworth’s poetry relies on emotions, or more specifically, poignant emotions. Under these circumstances, it cannot be helped if some of his poetry provokes negative emotions. However, Wordsworth also believes that above all else, his poetry should bring pleasure to readers. Thus, he relies on meter—something that the reader’s “mind has been accustomed when in an unexcited or a less excited state”—to create “an intertexture of ordinary feeling” and balance out any negative emotions that could otherwise be too overwhelming for the reader.

●● I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 21


### Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks the second time that Wordsworth declares “that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Evidently, for Wordsworth, emotions are of paramount importance with regards to writing poetry. However, Wordsworth also reiterates that poetry must also carry the fruit of profound thought. In order to achieve this balance of emotion and thought, Wordsworth advocates for

a certain process to poetic creation. The poet should not begin writing immediately after the initial emotional experience. Rather, the poet must wait until they no longer feel those emotions and then rehash and contemplate them calmly and in solitude, as poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” Then, after a certain period of contemplation, an emotion “similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation” will overtake the poet’s sense of calmness. It is this emotion—the emotion that is well thought-out and that “does itself actually exist in the mind”—that the poet should write about in their composition.

●● I have one request to make of my Reader, which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others.

**Related Characters:** William Wordsworth (speaker), Cosmopolitan Readers, Late-Neoclassical Writers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Wordsworth closes out his preface by asking his readers to form their own opinions about the ballads to come. Given the revolutionary nature of his poetry as well as the criticisms he makes in the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth is keenly aware that the popular poets of his time will most likely react negatively to his work. This rather unsettles Wordsworth, as the herd mentality of modern, urban populations may cause groups of people to unnecessarily “dislike” his poems. In attempt to prevent this from happening, Wordsworth encourages the reader to “decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection of what will probably be the judgment of others” towards the end of his preface. In other words, Wordsworth wants his readers to think and decide for themselves whether his poetry is good.

Wordsworth’s encouragement for readers to think and decide for themselves is not a mere attempt to gain approval. Indeed, it reflects the Romantic promotion of individualism: Wordsworth promotes the individual mind as a critical authority that is allowed freedom from preconceived notions and peer influence.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PREFACE TO THE LYRICAL BALLADS

Wordsworth explains that the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published as a sort of experiment to test the public reception of poems that use “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation.” The experiment was successful, better than Wordsworth was expecting, and many were pleased with the poems.

Wordsworth acknowledges that his friend (Samuel Taylor Coleridge) supplied several poems in the collection, including *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. He then relates that he and his friends wish to start a new type of poetry, poetry of the sort seen in *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth notes that he was initially unwilling to write the preface as some sort of systemic defense of this new genre, because he doesn’t want to reason anyone into liking these poems. He also says the motives behind starting this new genre of poetry are too complex to fully articulate in so few words. Still, he has decided to furnish a preface: his poems are so different from the poems of his age that they require at least a brief explanation as to their conception.

Wordsworth claims that just as authors have a right to use certain ideas and techniques, they also have a right to exclude other ideas and techniques. In every age, different styles of poetry arise, and people expect different things from poetry. He goes on to cite many great yet different poets of old, from Catullus Terence to Alexander Pope. Wordsworth wants to use the preface to explain why he writes poetry the way he does, so that people don’t see his nonconformity as laziness.

Wordsworth relates that his principal goal in writing the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* was to portray common life in an interesting and honest way, and to appeal to readers’ emotions by generating “a state of excitement.” He chose to depict common life because in that situation, people are generally more self-aware and more honest. The feelings that arise in that condition are simpler, more understandable, and more durable. Furthermore, the language of the peasantry is pure, as common people are in constant communication with nature and far away from “social vanity.”

*Wordsworth initially considered his poems to be an experiment, suggesting that he wasn’t all that confident that the public would receive them warmly. It would appear that as the first edition of the Lyrical Ballads were well-received, Wordsworth should feel at ease. However, a certain degree of uneasiness remains—Wordsworth still feels the need to explain his experimental poetry in a preface.*



*Wordsworth was not alone in his endeavor to start a new type of poetry. From this, readers can gather that multiple poets during Wordsworth’s era were dissatisfied with the trends of contemporary poetry. Wordsworth’s disclaimer—that his reasons for starting a new genre of poetry cannot be captured in the space of a preface—implies that the faults of late-Neoclassical poetry are also complicated. From this, readers can gather that Wordsworth lived in an era when things were growing increasingly complex with the onset of modernity.*



*In drawing on many great yet disparate poets of old, Wordsworth implies that at different times, different styles of poetry were considered great. In other words, each generation lives in a different situation and thus naturally prefers a different style of poetry that somehow aligns with or responds to the times. Thus, Wordsworth writes differently from his contemporaries not because he is lazy, but because he senses that the changing times need a new style of poetry to match.*



*Wordsworth’s decision to use common life and language in his poetry implies that upper-class life and lofty language are insufficient for poetic expression. Throughout the preface, Wordsworth seems to equate cosmopolitanism with corruption.*



The language of the peasantry carries a certain permanence, unlike the lofty language of the late-Neoclassical writers. The late-Neoclassical poets believe that the lofty poetry they write bring them as well as poetry itself honor. However, Wordsworth perceives many things to be wrong with these poets and their lofty language: “they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.” To Wordsworth, these poets are utterly unrelatable for the general literate masses.

On the other hand, Wordsworth states that triviality and lack of profound thought is a larger problem than lofty language among his contemporary poets. He prides himself in the fact that his poems actually have “a worthy purpose.” His poetry—like all good poetry—“is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Of course, it is also necessary that the poet “thought long and deeply” prior to writing the poem. Wordsworth believes that if someone continuously observes and contemplates their feelings, they will be enlightened, develop better taste, and have their “affections ameliorated”; someone who processes their feelings will become a better person. This process of observance and profound thought is necessary, as the poet must have their “taste exalted”. The poet is, in a sense, elevated from their peers.

Wordsworth then declares the purpose of his poems: “to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated under a state of excitement,” or, more specifically, “to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature.” The purpose of his poems is to depict the thoughts and feelings present during certain emotional experiences. Wordsworth then cites a few of his ballads and relays how those particular poems follow this purpose. He declares that “the feeling [developed in his poems] gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.” He claims that readers will understand his statement better after reading two of his ballads, “Poor Susan” and “Childless Father.”

*Wordsworth’s criticism of the late-Neoclassical poets carries a harsh and disdainful tone. Wordsworth accuses these poets of “[separating] themselves from the sympathies of men,” or making themselves unrelatable to the masses—including their readers. Furthermore, they constantly and randomly change the style of their poetry to suit their own ever-changing tastes. Wordsworth views this sort of ignorance and inconstancy as self-serving.*



*Wordsworth believes that poetry ought to be serious and profound—poems need to have a purpose and cannot be intended purely for shallow entertainment. Emotions are, for Wordsworth, a very serious and profound subject. At the same time, emotions cannot be separated from thoughts, as the two are inextricably tied together. Thus, readers can infer that good poetry should seriously deal with both emotions and thoughts. This sort of poetry will help people become better people.*



*Wordsworth’s goal is to connect thoughts and feelings—but it still seems that feelings are more important to him, as he repeats again and again that good poetry hinges on emotional experiences. Wordsworth’s obscure declaration about feelings, actions, and situations implies that more than any occurrence, he values the emotions that accompanied that occurrence. In other words, feelings are the most important aspect to any experience. Wordsworth’s lack of explanation with regards to his declaration, and his direction of the reader to two of his poems, suggests that he believes that poetry can convey certain ideas that can’t be expressed any other way.*



Wordsworth strongly believes that “the human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants.” It is the writer’s job “to produce or enlarge this capability,” especially during Wordsworth’s present day, as there are many modern forces and “great national events” dulling human minds. Modernity leads humans to crave sensationalism and instant gratification. This manifests in literary trends: people of Wordsworth’s era crave the “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” of the late-Neoclassical writers rather than the invaluable works of writers like Shakespeare and Milton. Wordsworth is disgusted with these trends and their mind-dulling force, but still believes that given “certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind” and the power of nature, there is hope for revival.

Wordsworth turns to the subject of style. He notes that in the *Lyrical Ballads*, he avoids personifying abstract ideas because he wants to use the language of the common man and “keep [his] Reader in the company of flesh and blood.” Wordsworth also avoids what he calls “poetic diction” in order to keep the language in his poetry as simple and as honest as possible—he sees this as “good sense.” This avoidance prevents him from using phrases and figures of speech that are considered to be “the common inheritance of Poets,” but it also prevents him from using phrases that have become vulgar from overuse by bad poets.

Wordsworth observes that there are many critics who disapprove of poems in which the language, “according to the strict laws of metre, does not differ from that of prose.” However, Wordsworth approves of these “prosaisms,” as they can be found in many great poems, including those by the great poet Milton. He cites a sonnet by John Gray, “On the Death of Richard West,” as an example of a poem whose most effective lines are written in a prosaic style.

Wordsworth reiterates that there is no essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose. People often personify poetry and painting as sisters, but Wordsworth thinks poetry and prose are even closer: “they both speak by and to the same organs [...] their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree.” He explains that poetry and prose are both altogether human: “Poetry sheds no **tears** ‘such as Angels weep,’ but natural and human tears.” Likewise, poetry and prose both bleed real, human blood; poetry “can boast of no celestial Ichor.”

*The Industrial Revolution and its accompanying technological progress led people to crave instant gratification, which, in turn, led writers to use sensationalism to cater to this craving. Instead of bending to this trend, Wordsworth calls upon the reader’s sensibility so that they can find appeal in the commonest of things. It is important to note that Wordsworth does not disapprove of drama per se, as he considers Shakespeare and Milton—both are writers who engage dramatic subjects—to be great writers; rather, he disapproves of drama for the sake of drama. In order to counteract the excessive drama that his contemporaries employ, Wordsworth intends to use nature to bring readers back to their senses.*



*Wordsworth uses common language because it’s realistic, and, thus, relatable. He finds abstract ideas to be distancing—it gives readers the sense that what they are reading about is intangible and does not apply to real life. Wordsworth also expresses frustration that many poetic phrases have become hackneyed from overuse and have lost their original meaning.*



*Here, Wordsworth demystifies poetry by suggesting that in many ways, it’s just prose written in meter. From his perspective, there is no reason not to use “prosaisms,” especially if they can convey profound thought and feeling. By citing Gray’s “On the Death of Richard West,” Wordsworth demonstrates that sometimes, prosaic language can be much more effective than poetic language in a poem.*



*Wordsworth’s personification of poetry is, considering what he said earlier about refraining from personifying abstract ideas, quite ironic. However, through his beautiful use of poetic language in this personification, Wordsworth demonstrates that he is perfectly capable of writing in the lofty style used by his late-Neoclassical contemporaries. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, he does not write in common language out of necessity, but out of choice. Furthermore, poetry and prose are, in essence, the same. Poetry has no “celestial Ichor”—the substance that flows through the veins of the Greek gods and goddesses—but only human blood, just like prose.*



Wordsworth realizes that some people may think rhyme and meter distinguish poetry from prose, but he thinks that this sort of “regular and uniform” distinction is different from that between common language and poetic diction. In the latter case, the reader “is utterly at the mercy of the Poet respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion”; in the former case, both poet and reader submit to a certain form and there is no interference. Why, then, has Wordsworth chosen to write poetry instead of prose? Simply because he finds metrical language more charming. Furthermore, if meter restricts him, Wordsworth has “the entire world of nature” to write about. To those who criticize Wordsworth for using rhyme and meter but not poetic diction, he replies that readers have read with pleasure poems with simpler language than the language in his ballads.

Wordsworth also sees a great benefit in using rhyme and meter: poems can excite painful emotions, and the presence of something “regular” may help soften and restrain those painful emotions “by an intertexture of ordinary feeling.” This is why people feel they can reread the tragic parts of Shakespeare, but not of Clarissa Harlowe or of James Shirley: Shakespeare tempers his work with rhyme and meter, so that in the end, his works still gives more pleasure than pain. Furthermore, readers generally associate certain types of meter with certain emotions. The poet can use these associations to his or her advantage and affect certain emotions, especially if the poet’s diction is insufficiently evocative.

Wordsworth remarks that if the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” were a sort of systemic defense for his poetic theory, then he would need to go through all the ways that metrical language can lead to pleasure. As the preface is not intended to be such a thorough defense, he will simply say that one of the chief pleasures of metrical language is “the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude.” Wordsworth briefly elaborates, saying that “this principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeder,” before claiming that the limits of the preface prohibits him from speaking more on the subject, and “[he] must content [himself] with a general summary.”

*Wordsworth chooses to submit to the rules of meter because both poet and reader have to adhere. In the case of common language versus poetic diction, the poet and reader would be on level ground when it comes to the former, but the reader would be utterly subject to the whims of the poet in the case of the latter. This is unfair to the reader and can make it difficult for the reader to truly understand what the poet is trying to say. Also, Wordsworth simply finds meter charming for aesthetic reasons. Even the simplest of things, when conveyed in meter, carry a certain charm. Furthermore, he is so free in terms of choosing his subject that the small restraint of meter appears to be nothing in comparison.*



*Wordsworth realizes that the subject of his poetry can be overwhelming and may be difficult for the reader to deal with; thus, his use of rhyme and meter will give the reader a sense of familiarity that will make the overwhelming sense of foreignness more bearable. From this, readers can gather that Wordsworth does not believe any negative emotion should be the chief emotion a reader experiences when reading poetry. The main emotion that readers experience should always be positive and pleasurable.*



*Wordsworth’s occasional nonsensicality—as exemplified by his vague statement addressing “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude”—marks one of the major flaws that critics find with the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.” Some traditions of literary criticism hold that Wordsworth’s critical writings are mostly nonsensical, and where they do make sense is where Coleridge helped him. In general, Wordsworth seems to dismiss any nonsensical declaration with the claim that it is too long to explain, as seen here.*



Wordsworth proceeds to explain the process of poetic creation. The poet must first recall their emotions in “tranquility” and contemplate those emotions in peace until they dissolve away and a new, kindred emotion comes into place. Then the poet can begin the composition process, and the poet will feel pleasure. The poet must always be careful that readers of their poem will feel more pleasure than the deeper passions that the poem addresses. People tend to read poetry, and not prose, over and over again because of this pleasure. Wordsworth cites Alexander Pope as an example of a poet who produces pleasurable poems from “the plainest common sense.” Poetry can be a vehicle to convey truth in a pleasurable way.

Wordsworth addresses possible faults of his ballads: he may have written on an unworthy subject, and he may have made arbitrary connections between things that no one would understand except himself. He is not sure yet which of his expressions are faulty; thus, he refrains from correcting anything. Wordsworth believes that a poet who corrects his own work too often could easily lose his or her confidence. Furthermore, the imperfect reader may also perceive certain poems as faulty when they are actually fine.

There is one fault that Wordsworth assures readers they will never find in his poetry: the fault of writing about a trivializing poetry. Samuel Johnson’s poem “I put my hat upon my head,” lampooning the basic ballad meter, exemplifies this fault. Wordsworth terms this lampoon “a mode of false criticism”: ballad meter is intended to be simple, but that doesn’t mean it cannot be a medium for serious subjects. Wordsworth then cites a stanza from another poem by Johnson, “The Babes in the Wood,” to show an example of simple meter communicating a worthy subject. Through quoting and analyzing these two poems by Johnson, Wordsworth shows that it is the subject, not the meter, of a poem that decides whether it is trivial.

Wordsworth asks readers to form their own feelings and opinions, and not go by what others think, when judging his poetry. Wordsworth also tells readers that if they thought one poem was good and others were bad, they should go back and review those they thought were bad. Reading and judging poetry is an acquired talent, and a review would only be just to the poet. Wordsworth doesn’t want readers to make quick judgments about his poetry, as such judgments are often wrong.

*Wordsworth doesn’t think poets should write in the heat of an emotional moment, as the poet may be confused about what they are really feeling. They must first contemplate their emotion in peace to achieve a proper understanding of what they felt before engaging in the writing process. Poetry written in the heat of the moment may be too overwhelming for the reader. In this way, Wordsworth reiterates the idea that it is important not to overwhelm the reader—reading poetry must be a pleasurable experience.*



*Wordsworth’s uneasiness with regards to the reception of his ballads manifests once again. He admits that some of his ballads may have faults, but at the same time, he makes it impossible for the reader to accuse his poetry of many faults by saying that the reader, too, has faults.*



*Overall, Wordsworth takes poetry, as well as prefaces to poetic works, very seriously—poetry must be written after a serious emotional experience, after serious contemplation, and in a serious manner. Even poetry written in simple ballad meter ought not to be lampooned, or satirized. Wordsworth considers this sort of satire a wrongful way to engage in criticism. If one is to criticize poetry, one must do so in a serious, thoughtful manner.*



*Wordsworth’s uneasiness and insecurities bubble up to the surface once again—he is anxious that readers should like his poetry. If they don’t enjoy his ballads the first time around, he declares, then they ought to read it a second time. To some readers, it may seem that Wordsworth is making excuses for himself: as judging poetry is an acquired talent, readers who dislike his poetry may simply not be experienced enough.*



Wordsworth declares that there is nothing more he can do but let the reader read his ballads and experience the pleasure they offer firsthand. He realizes that asking readers to try his experimental ballads means that they must “give up much of what [they] ordinarily enjoy” in poetry. Wordsworth wants to show that his poetry is better and offers pleasure “of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature.” It is not his intention to denounce other forms of poetry; rather, Wordsworth wishes to promote a new genre of poetry that he feels will help keep humans human. He awaits to hear from readers whether they think he has achieved his purpose, and whether that purpose was worth achieving.

*Overall, Wordsworth still believes in the worthiness of his own poems: he sees them as a permanent source of pleasure in world that is ever-changing. Wordsworth also sees his poems in Lyrical Ballads as extraordinarily unique, not having much in common with the poems that readers usually enjoy. Still, as his poetry is so revolutionary and different from all other poetry, Wordsworth remains somewhat afraid of criticism from the masses. His appeal for a judgment from the reader demonstrates that he is still anxious for public approval.*







## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Liu, Sarah. "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jul 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Liu, Sarah. "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads." LitCharts LLC, July 29, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/preface-to-the-lyrical-ballads>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Wordsworth, William. Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. CreateSpace. 2016.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Wordsworth, William. Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace. 2016.