

# On william wordsworth's preface to lyrical ballads essay



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On William Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads

The late 18th century saw a fundamental change in the historically rigid structure of poetry, as witnessed by the collection of poems entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, penned by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. At first deemed an experiment, *Lyrical Ballads* garnered enough interest and favor to warrant Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" in 1802, as an introduction to the second edition of the collection. This revolutionary preface became a manifesto of sorts, ushering in a period of poetry defined by descriptions of raw emotion, while straying away from the hierarchy of past poetry. More specifically, Wordsworth advocated a break from poetic diction and a divergence from traditional meter and decorum. By lowering himself from the elitist standards that poets were held to, Wordsworth could emulate the speech and imagery of the common man, in order to better capture the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that he felt was indicative of good poetry. Although Coleridge did not share all of the same views as Wordsworth, these two poets, drawing from nature and everyday life, helped pioneer an unprecedented era of poetry.

In the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth aimed to attack the traditional view of poetry, and break away from the strict adherence to the rules and guidelines that accompanied the craft. He vowed to avoid the lofty language of poetic diction, the elevated speech and aristocratic word choice that served as the mold for all good poetry. In regards to poetic diction, Wordsworth claims, "I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it" (Wordsworth 267). He felt that too many proclaimed poets had followed this recipe blindly throughout the 17th

century. Instead, Wordsworth sought to speak in “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” (Wordsworth 263). The poems he wrote in *Lyrical Ballads* reflect this claim, as he tried to use words that were much more common in everyday speech. In addition to using words found in the vernacular of the middle class, Wordsworth attempted to evoke imagery that people could relate to.

He often drew from nature and daily occurrences, as one reviewer of Wordsworth pointed out: The death of a poor seduced girl, the return of a disabled soldier to his native village, the wreck of the fortunes of a once thriving family, the solitude of aged widowhood, the nightly moanings of a red-cloaked maniac haunting some dreary spot in the woods—nothing can exceed the pathos with which Wordsworth can tell such simple local stories as these (Masson 56). Prior to *Lyrical Ballads*, it was almost unheard of to read poetry centered on such mundane and lower class subjects. However, by writing about these simpler, often rural events, Wordsworth felt he was able to induce a stronger, more primal emotion in the hearts of men. The most significant aspect to Wordsworth's preface was his belief that poetry should be written with the intention of giving pleasure to the reader. The passion incited by a poem should stir the reader, and evoke powerful emotions.

By writing about rural and farm life, Wordsworth was able to show the intensity of these emotions through everyday behavior, as one critic explains, “Because passions and manners are linked, the poet can express internal states by showing habitual behavior” (Bialostosky 915). Wordsworth demonstrated this emotion in his poem “We Are Seven,” where he

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capitalizes on the innocence and ignorance of a child's comprehension of death. This poem is powerful because it is written in common language, with a rural setting, and features a child as the main character. By weaving all of these elements together, Wordsworth creates a powerful collection of poems, where he attempts to achieve his goal of creating an " overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 265). Lyrical Ballads revolutionized the field of poetry, and Wordsworth's manifesto helped lay the groundwork for many poets throughout the romantic period. He managed this feat by using common language to describe the joys and struggles of the average family. This heightened the emotional response of the reader, along with the reader's ability to relate to the themes and imagery drawn from nature.

In this endeavor, Wordsworth believed that " a species of poetry would be produced, which is genuine poetry" (Wordsworth 274).