

How does
Wordsworth portray
real people in the
Lyrical Ballads essay



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Lyrical Ballads, and in particular the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, is considered a central work of Romantic literary theory. In it, Wordsworth discusses what he sees as the elements of a new type of poetry, one based on the “real language of men” and the work itself avoids the poetic diction of much eighteenth-century poetry, whose most famous exponent was John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, which benefitted from drastic overuse of verbose Latinate vocabulary. He felt this wasn't an accurate reflection of real people, and sought to portray them through using language which they used.

In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth famously described poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings from emotions recollected in tranquility”, and wrote to justify – in theoretical terms – his practice of writing a new and “experimental” poetry, one whose language is “fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation.” He rejected the Miltonic approach to poetry, and instead favoured much more Anglo-Saxon words, for their gritty implications – appropriate for a publication in which most of the poems are focused around everyday people and situations. Unsurprisingly, these are very pastoral poems, many of which solely include narrative. Although this may seem mundane for such a famous poet, this was Wordsworth's statement of protest against the style of the time, and his digression instead led to a new style of poetry in which living language is valued highly, as it allows a sense of man speaking to man, and is a more accessible style of poetry than his predecessors'.

In *Michael*, a poem about a father and son who form an eternal bond

(*Michael*, an eighty-year old shepherd, and *Luke*, his son), Wordsworth

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portrays the relationship between the two. The first indication we receive of the tight-knit paternal bond is the use of language when describing Michael's care for Luke. On two occasions, Michael's affection is emphasised by using particularly matriarchal language: "[Michael] had done him [Luke] female service" and "

female hand". Wordsworth tries to convey the strength of the bond between the two in an ordinary working family; a clear diversion from the traditional poetry of the time. Read about the Boarding House article Michael is evidently a plain, hard-working, content and fulfilled man, but the land he has worked and lived on has to be sold on when his brother defaults on a loan that Michael had guaranteed. From line 236 (" " Isabel," said he, .

.. "), Wordsworth uses dialogue for the first time to instill the sense of a soliloquy in the poem. Michael speaks with a Shakespearean dignity; he is more upset that he is soon to lose his land, and his family will be affected, than that his brother has betrayed him. The nature of the poem itself is something which concentrates itself around the ostensibly ordinary; it is, by definition, a pastoral poem. It describes the life of a shepherd and his family, but even this varies from the traditional meaning of the word, as the country scene is far from idyllic.

After hearing that his land will have to be sold, and sending off his son in order to make enough money for the family to still be comfortable, Michael goes about constructing a sheepfold, of which Luke lays the cornerstone. This is, again, a seemingly unimportant detail, especially given the content of contemporary poetry, but in the context of a shepherd's life, this is more

than a mere detail, and within the context of the poem, it is critical. Firstly, it provides us with possibly the best example of typically Wordsworthian language in the whole poem: the building materials are described as a “Stragglings heap of unhewn stones”, a phrase which exemplifies the fricative consonants and drawn-out vowels of inherently Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. The pile of stones is also crucial to the poem as it signifies the transient impermanence and brevity of life, which leads us into thinking of Michael’s life – he has worked for “70 years” for everything he owns, and it is to be taken from him in a relative instant.

The sheepfold itself is never finished, as Michael learns that Luke has become a criminal and must flee “beyond the seas” – every day for the rest of his life, Michael goes to mourn the ‘death’ of his son at the pile of stones, and, seven years later, he dies. The poem’s obvious purpose is to support his notion that a pastoral life is pure, moral, and happy. Wordsworth believed that living close to nature, living an uncomplicated, spiritual life devoted to honest labor was the ideal. His narrative suggests that if Luke had remained in the natural valley with his parents and continued to live the pastoral life, he would have retained his moral character and would have later saved his parents from years of grief.

Although Michael is the prime example of Wordsworth’s portrayal of real people in *The Lyrical Ballads*, several other poems display his wish to convey the lives of real people through techniques such as language and routine situations.