

## Background and Discussion Questions for *Lyrical Ballads*

The PDF which was sent out earlier this month contains the poems that were released in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798. The poems were a joint production of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, although Wordsworth contributed more poems than did Coleridge. The poems written by Coleridge include “The Rime of the Ancyent Mariner,” “The Foster Mother’s Tale,” “The Nightingale,” and “The Dungeon.” A second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, containing additional poems and a preface, was published in 1800.

In the advertisement to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, contained in the PDF sent out earlier this month, Wordsworth writes that the poems were “written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the pursuit of poetic pleasure.”

In the preface to the second edition, Wordsworth attempted to justify his poetic style after critics lambasted the poems contained in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth outlined his theory of poetry in the preface and the following selections are taken from his preface.

The principal object, then, proposed in the Poems, was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations 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.

“For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and 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.”

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. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place [he refers here to the Napoleonic Wars], and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the paid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.

“Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing; it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion. . . Poetry is the image of man and nature.”

“The end of poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure; but, by the supposition, excitement in an unusual and irregular state of the mind; ideas and feelings do not, in that state, succeed each other in accustomed order.”

I have said the poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action,

the tranquillity 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.

1. Does Wordsworth achieve his goal of producing poetry which is expressed in common language in the *Lyrical Ballads*?
2. Do the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* contain emotional passages which help the reader to understand and participate in the strong feelings experienced by the poet?
3. Do you agree with Wordsworth that poetry is the “image of man and nature”? Why or why not?
4. Wordsworth often makes reference to nature, and seems to think that nature has healing powers. Do you agree with his assessment?
5. Wordsworth states that powerful feelings must be remembered during times of tranquility. Why does he believe that tranquility is required for reading poetry? Do you agree with his assessment?
6. Why does the mariner kill the albatross in “Rime of the Ancyent Mariner”?
7. Does the mariner have to atone for the death of the albatross, or is this atonement a figment of his imagination?
8. Why does Coleridge use the word “Rime” rather than “rhyme” in the poem? One meaning of the word “Rime” is an accumulation of matter on top of an underlying layer. Does this imply that there are layers of meaning in the poem?
9. Is the albatross a symbol of something else in the poem? If so, what is it a symbol of?
10. Do the themes of some of Wordsworth’s poem seem trivial, and if so, how does this fit in with his ideas concerning the proper subject of poetry?
11. Several of the poems contain a dramatic story. Do these stories help or hinder the functioning of the poems?
12. What does Wordsworth mean when he says that “the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity 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.”? What is the re-action he writes about in this passage? Does he mean recreation rather than re-action?
13. Are the poems contained in the *Lyrical Ballads* that different than the poems which preceded them? Is Wordsworth overstating his case that he is developing a new kind of poetry?