

William Wordsworth

(1770 – 1850)



Biography:

William Wordsworth, (born April 7, 1770, Cockermouth, Cumberland, England – died April 23, 1850, Rydal Mount, Westmorland), English poet whose *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), written with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped launch the English Romantic movement.

Early Life and Education

Wordsworth was born in the Lake District of northern England, the second of five children of a modestly prosperous estate manager. He lost his mother when he was 7 and his father when he was 13, upon which the orphan boys were sent off by guardian uncles to a grammar school at Hawkshead, a village in the heart of the Lake District. At Hawkshead Wordsworth received an excellent education in classics, literature, and mathematics, but the chief advantage to him there was the chance to indulge in the boyhood pleasures of living and playing in the outdoors. The natural scenery of the English lakes could terrify as well as nurture, as Wordsworth would later testify in the line “I grew up fostered alike by beauty and by fear,” but its generally benign aspect gave the growing boy the confidence he articulated in one of his first important poems, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey...,” namely, “that Nature never did betray the heart that loved her.”

Wordsworth moved on in 1787 to St. John's College, Cambridge. Repelled by the competitive pressures there, he elected to idle his way through the university, persuaded that he "was not for that hour, nor for that place." The most important thing he did in his college years was to devote his summer vacation in 1790 to a long walking tour through revolutionary France. There he was caught up in the passionate enthusiasm that followed the fall of the Bastille, and became an ardent republican sympathizer. Upon taking his Cambridge degree—an undistinguished "pass"—he returned in 1791 to France, where he formed a passionate attachment to a Frenchwoman, Annette Vallon. But before their child was born in December 1792, Wordsworth had to return to England and was cut off there by the outbreak of war between England and France. He was not to see his daughter Caroline until she was nine.

The three or four years that followed his return to England were the darkest of Wordsworth's life. Unprepared for any profession, rootless, virtually penniless, bitterly hostile to his own country's opposition to the French, he lived in London in the company of radicals like William Godwin and learned to feel a profound sympathy for the abandoned mothers, beggars, children, vagrants, and victims of England's wars who began to march through the sombre poems he began writing at this time. This dark period ended in 1795, when a friend's legacy made possible Wordsworth's reunion with his beloved sister Dorothy—the two were never again to live apart—and their move in 1797 to Alfoxden House, near Bristol.

The Great Decade: 1797–1808

While living with Dorothy at Alfoxden House, Wordsworth became friends with a fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They formed a partnership that would change both poets' lives and alter the course of English poetry.

Coleridge and Lyrical Ballads

The partnership between Wordsworth and Coleridge, rooted in one marvelous year (1797–98) in which they "together wantoned in wild Poesy," had two consequences for Wordsworth. First it turned him away from the long poems on which he had laboured since his Cambridge days. These included poems of social protest like *Salisbury Plain*, locodescriptive poems such as *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* (published in 1793), and *The Borderers*, a blank-verse tragedy exploring the psychology of guilt (and not published until 1842). Stimulated by Coleridge and under the healing influences of nature and his sister, Wordsworth began in 1797–98 to compose the short lyrical and dramatic poems for which he is best remembered by many readers. Some of these were affectionate tributes to Dorothy, some were tributes to daffodils, birds, and other elements of "Nature's holy plan," and some were portraits of simple rural people intended to illustrate basic truths of human nature.

Many of these short poems were written to a daringly original program formulated jointly by Wordsworth and Coleridge, and aimed at breaking the decorum of Neoclassical verse. These poems appeared in 1798 in a slim, anonymously authored volume entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, which opened with Coleridge's long poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and closed with Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." All but three of the intervening poems were Wordsworth's, and, as he declared in a preface to a second edition two years later, their object was "to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them...in a selection of language really used by men,...tracing in them...the primary laws of our nature." Most of the poems were dramatic in form, designed to reveal the character of the speaker. The manifesto and the accompanying poems thus set forth a new style, a new vocabulary, and new subjects for poetry, all of them foreshadowing 20th-century developments.¹

¹ Stephen Maxfield Parrish, "William Wordsworth: English Author", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/biography/William-Wordsworth

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