

Learning to Appreciate Poetry

Presented by Paul Rogers

William Wordsworth



Daffodils

A few words in advance

Wordsworth's dates: 1770-1850

Lyrical Ballads was published jointly with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798. It is often regarded as a landmark of romantic poetry. Two years later, Wordsworth added a preface in which he pleaded for poets to use direct and natural speech with no ornate, archaic or confusing language. This preface is a manifesto of the Romantic movement.

As a young man, Wordsworth was a radical, supporting the French Revolution and fathering a daughter with a French woman, Anne Vallon, in 1792. He was very close to his sister, Dorothy, with whom he revisited France in 1802 arranging to pay for his daughter's welfare. He married an old school friend, Mary Hutchinson, in 1805 and they had five children. He became more reactionary as he got older and was made Poet Laureate in 1843, although he wrote very little poetry afterwards.

He is buried in St. Oswald's church in Grasmere, in the English Lake District, where he had a home, Dove Cottage, for many years. He will always be associated with this beautiful part of England, although he travelled widely and wrote about many other places as well.

Romanticism requires us to search for the sublime. This had previously been regarded solely as the preserve of religious faith. For the romantics, the sublime is a meeting of the internal (emotional) and the external (natural) worlds. Our emotions overtake rational thought when we experience the glories of creation.

The beauty and wonder of the natural world had never previously been appreciated in this way. Artists were expected to "improve on nature" in painting and literature, whereas romantics appreciate the natural world just as it is. To this day, our love of landscape and scenery is a direct consequence of the influence of Romanticism.

The Poem

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Rhyme Scheme

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
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They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

There are 4 stanzas, each of 6 lines, with a rhyme scheme of a b a b c c. The metre is iambic tetrameter throughout.

Imagery

I wandered **lonely as a cloud**
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a **crowd**,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and **dancing** in the breeze.

Continuous **as the stars that shine**
And **twinkle** on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in **sprightly dance**.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in **glee**:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a **jocund company**:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What **wealth** the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that **inward eye**
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart **with pleasure fills**,
And **dances with the daffodils**.

Romantic poetry may abhor ornate and flowery phrases, but after the austerity of the Augustan age, figurative language makes a triumphant return. Look at the three similes identified here, coupled with the abundance of metaphors. The daffodils dance, they toss their heads and the waves are gleeful. The golden yellow colour is seen as wealth to the poet so that in recollection, his heart dances alongside the daffodils.

Basic Meaning

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
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I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

This is not a difficult poem. It is a depiction of a natural scene that brings joy to a lonely man who had been wandering alone, seemingly without friends. The sight of the daffodils and the seascape close by, lifts his mood and he is able to “recollect in tranquillity” the pleasure he derived from the sight.

Concluding Remarks

Wordsworth is a giant in the world of English literature in general and poetry in particular. His poetic autobiography, *The Prelude*, is a rival to *Paradise Lost* as one of the greatest long poems in the English language. Had he not written much, however, his early friendship with Coleridge and the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, would have ensured him a place in the formation of the Romantic movement. Where Wordsworth leads, he is soon followed by Shelley, Keats and Byron and the romantic tradition continues throughout the 19th century concluding with poets such as Tennyson Browning and Hardy.

It is only the advent of Modernism in the early 20th century, first in prose, and then in poetry, that Romanticism's progress is checked. Usually in literature, a critical reaction against a successful style or movement is almost inevitable, and in the last 100 years we have seen much in the way of experimentation and new directions. However, Wordsworth, like Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and Dickens will always be recognised as a writer not just of his time, but for all time.

Preparing for the Next Unit

