

Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians

Teachers' Notes

Curriculum subject

English Literature

Key Stage

4 and 5

Author or text

William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*

Theme

A close reading

Rationale

Lyrical Ballads, first published in 1798, has been described by the journalist Nicholas Lezard as 'quite simply, possibly the single most important collection of poems in English ever published'. It grew out of the friendship and artistic collaboration between William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but Wordsworth – who contributed most of the poems and whose Preface to the 1800 edition outlines the aesthetic intention of *Lyrical Ballads* – was its guiding force. In this lesson, students will explore a number of poems from *Lyrical Ballads* in the light of Wordsworth's key philosophies, considering the extent to which Wordsworth and Coleridge succeeded in putting these philosophies into practice.

Content

Primary sources from the website

- [The 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*](#) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, containing the Advertisement, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'
- [The 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*](#) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, containing the Preface, notes to 'The Thorn' and extracts from 'The Thorn', and a note to 'The Ancient Mariner'
- ['We Are Seven' by William Wordsworth](#), printed in William Hazlitt's *Select British Poets, or New Elegant Extracts* (1824)

Recommended reading from the website

- [The Romantics](#) by Stephanie Forward
- [William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey'](#) by Philip Shaw

External links

- [BBC Radio 4, 'In Our Time' – discussion of *Lyrical Ballads*](#)
- [Nicholas Lezard – review of Fiona Stafford's edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Guardian*, 16 July 2013](#)

Further reading

- James A. Butler, 'Poetry 1798-1807', in Stephen Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth* (Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1990)

Key questions

- What were William Wordsworth's hopes and intentions for *Lyrical Ballads*?
- What trends in 18th-century poetry was he reacting against?
- To what extent did he succeed?

Activities

- Students, in groups, should first explore the following sources:

- ◆ Advertisement to the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*
- ◆ Preface to 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*
- ◆ Notes to 'The Thorn' from the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*

They should identify key statements concerning Wordsworth's poetic philosophy and the trends he and Coleridge were reacting against. These could be highlighted in different colours and then shared with other groups – perhaps by using Haydon's portrait of Wordsworth as the centre of a spider diagram.

- Students should then be asked to explore the following sources:

- ◆ Extract from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'
- ◆ Extract from William Wordsworth's 'The Thorn'
- ◆ Extract from William Wordsworth's 'We Are Seven'
- ◆ Extract from William Wordsworth's 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'

- They should analyse the poems in the light of Wordsworth's intentions. To what extent, for instance, does Wordsworth succeed in bringing his language 'near to the language of men'? Is it true that the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* are free from 'what is usually called poetic diction'? How does 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' fit in?

There is scope for differentiation in terms of how the groups are composed and which texts they are asked to consider. 'We Are Seven' is the easiest poem to consider; 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' the most demanding.

- Students should report back on their findings, perhaps by placing each poem on a continuum line to reflect the extent to which they succeed in fulfilling Wordsworth's aims.

Extension activities

- Explore poems that exhibit some of the trends that Wordsworth and Coleridge were reacting against. Students could read extracts from poems such as John Dryden's 'MacFlecknoe' (1682) and Alexander

Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), focusing on their elevated diction and use of classical allusions. Do students feel included or excluded by these poems? What kind of person would you need to be in order to feel included? What contrasts can students draw between the exclusivity of Dryden and Pope's work, and Wordsworth's intention to draw on ordinary life and common experiences?

- Students could go on to explore other poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, particularly those that depict people who exist on the fringes of society: 'Old Man Travelling', 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', 'The Idiot Boy', 'The Mad Mother', 'The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman', 'Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'.
- Particularly able students could also look at Samuel Taylor Coleridge's critique of Wordsworth's poetic philosophy in Chapter 4 of *Biographia Literaria*.