



## A certain colouring of imagination

*The following extract is taken from the 'Preface' to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800), regarded as the Manifesto of English Romanticism. Wordsworth expresses a new concept of poetry, which emphasises the authenticity of rustic life, the use of a simple language, and the importance of emotions and imagination.*

William Wordsworth  
'Preface' to  
*Lyrical Ballads*  
(1800)

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby<sup>1</sup> ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously<sup>2</sup>, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse<sup>3</sup>, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. [...]

Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, I ask what is meant by the word 'poet'? What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions<sup>4</sup>, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting<sup>5</sup> to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled<sup>6</sup> to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up<sup>7</sup> in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than any thing which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves; whence<sup>8</sup>, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement<sup>9</sup>. [...]

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow<sup>10</sup> of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred<sup>11</sup> to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever<sup>12</sup>, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment.

1 whereby. Per mezzo del quale.

2 ostentatiously. Ostentatamente.

3 narrow ... intercourse. Cerchia ristretta dei loro rapporti interpersonali.

4 volitions. Desideri.

5 delighting. Gioendo.

6 impelled. Spinto, portato.

7 conjuring up. Evocare.

8 whence. Da qui.

9 excitement. Stimolo.

10 overflow. Straripamento, profusione.

11 kindred. Simile, affine.

12 whatsoever. Qualsiasi.



## READING COMPETENCE

**1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.**

- |                                |                              |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 colpito .....                | 6 avvenimenti .....          |
| 2 esprimo .....                | 7 rievocata, ricordata ..... |
| 3 principalmente .....         | 8 dotato .....               |
| 4 assomigliano .....           | 9 uniformità .....           |
| 5 controllo, costrizione ..... | 10 completamente .....       |

**2 READ the text again and do the following activities.**

- 1 Complete the summary of lines 1-7 with the words from the box.

imagination  
emotions

everyday

different  
language

Wordsworth wants to write poems about **(1)** ..... situations. He wants to write in simple **(2)** ..... and to use his **(3)** ..... to make people 'see' these ordinary things in a **(4)** ..... way, which will engage the readers' **(5)** .....

- 2 'Rustic life' (line 7) was chosen as a subject because

- A it is exotic.  
B country people live longer.  
C in this condition men's passions are in contact with nature.

- 3 The poet

- A is superior to other men. C cries more easily.  
B has a greater sensibility.

- 4 The poet can be affected by ..... things as if they were .....

- 5 What does Wordsworth mean by 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (line 35)?

- A The source of poetry is reason. C The source of poetry is deep thought.  
B The source of poetry is the heart.

- 6 'Emotion recollected in tranquillity' (line 36) means

- A a calm mind is necessary to make sense of feeling and emotion.  
B the poet must restrain his emotions.  
C the poet remembers and re-lives the emotion later.

- 7 Say if the speaker is a voice outside or inside the text.

- 8 How would you describe the vocabulary of this passage? Underline the correct alternative in each pair.

- |                       |                           |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 simple / complex    | 4 general / specific      |
| 2 formal / informal   | 5 entertaining / didactic |
| 3 concrete / abstract |                           |

- 9 How are man, nature and poetry interrelated, according to the poet? Re-order the phrases.

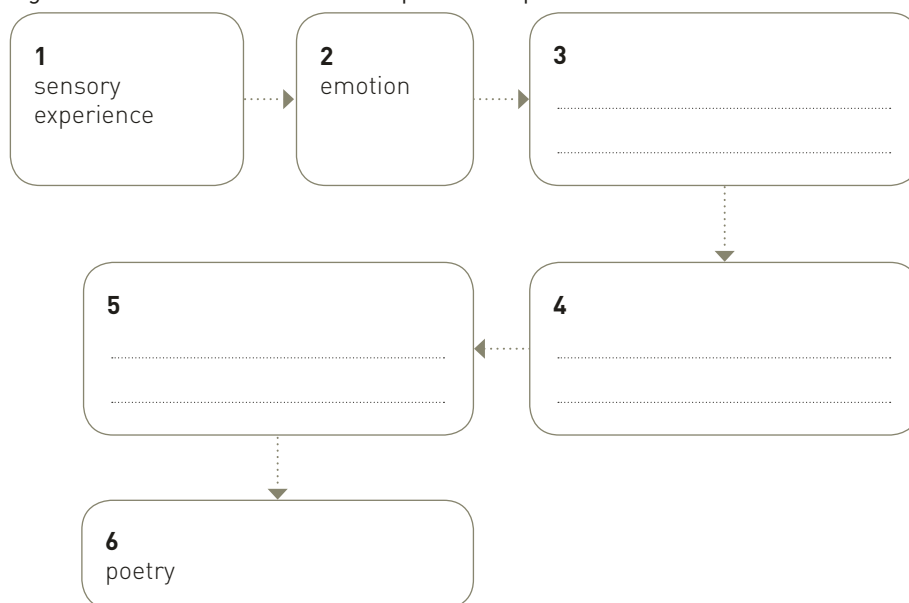
- ☐ nature has permanence in itself,  
☐ The poet should aspire to such essentiality,  
☐ it inspires simple and spontaneous passions  
☐ free from the influence of social conventions.  
☐ and elementary feelings.  
☒ 1 Man and nature are closely connected;

- 10 The speaker's aim is

- A to tell a story.  
B to contrast town and country.  
C to say what Romantic poetry is about.



11 Complete the diagram below which illustrates the process of poetic creation.



3 **COMPLETE** the summary with the words from the box.

purified  
overflow

thought  
events

spontaneous  
nature

similar  
tranquillity

humble  
sensibility



Wordsworth states that the object of Romantic poetry should be **(1)** ..... from everyday life, particularly the life of **(2)** ..... , rustic people, because in that condition the passions of men are more **(3)** ..... and durable, and they are expressed in a simple and direct way. Furthermore, they are linked to aspects of **(4)** ..... and beauty. Wordsworth also refers to the language to be used, that is, the language of low and rustic people, **(5)** ..... from vulgar expressions thanks to the imagination of the poet.

Wordsworth thinks that good poetry is the spontaneous **(6)** ..... of powerful feelings and the poet is a man who has more than usual organic **(7)** ..... and has also **(8)** ..... long and deeply. He claims that poetry has its origin from emotion recollected in **(9)** ..... . In a state of calm the poet is able to re-live a past emotion giving life to a **(10)** ..... emotion through the inner eye of imagination.