

SUMMARY OF THE PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS:

Preface to Lyrical Ballads by William Wordsworth begins with a discussion of the collection of poems, written mostly by Wordsworth with contributions by S.T. Coleridge. Originally published in 1798, in 1800, Wordsworth added an earlier version of the *Preface*, which he extended two years later. Because he felt his poems were of a new theme and style, Wordsworth felt they needed an introduction. Some scholars say that Coleridge wanted to write the preface, but never got around to it, so the work fell to Wordsworth instead. As the majority of the poems in the collection are by Wordsworth, this was probably a more appropriate choice, though there is suggestion in some of Coleridge's later writings that the two disagreed about what the Preface should say. In the *Preface*, Wordsworth writes that the purpose of the collection was to write poems that dealt with things that happen in everyday life. Most importantly, Wordsworth considered each poem in the collection to be an experiment in language usage, or diction. He wanted to find out if conversational language could be used effectively in poetry.

What, then, is poetry? Wordsworth sets out to define this particular form of art. In the *Preface to [Lyrical](#) Ballads*, Wordsworth outlines his definition of the nature and function of poetry—as well as identifying the qualities that make someone a true poet. For Wordsworth, poetry must reflect spontaneity and an “overflow of powerful feelings.” Passion is key, as are mood and temperament. Although poetry must emerge from spontaneity, it must not be written spontaneously. Rather, Wordsworth asserts that a poem should be the result of long and deep reflection. He also cautions against being too concerned with the poetic rules of Classicism.

Next, Wordsworth breaks down the poet's process into four stages. The first is observation. A person, object, or situation must stimulate powerful emotions in the Romantic poet, and those observations must be noted. Recollection follows, which is the stage when the poet contemplates those observations. For this, tranquility is a must. Memories may surface that are days old or older, and the poet should contemplate those memories to explore how the emotions they provoke relate to past experiences. The third stage is filtering, when the poet clears the mind of all non-essential elements. The result of this is that the poet's personal experience becomes relevant to a wider audience. It's not until the fourth and final stage that the poet should begin to compose. The goal is to express emotions in a way that the reader will understand, and can therefore contemplate.

Wordsworth's next topic is imagination. He begins by discussing how the neo-classicists defined imagination. They said that the mind was passive, and recorded sensations. Imagination, therefore, is a function of memory combined with the ability to associate those sensations with other things that may or may not exist. He provides the example of mythical creatures, which elicit, in literature, real sensations. For Romantics like Wordsworth, imagination is much more creative. Rather than assigning recorded sensations to other objects, the imagination has the power to create a new reality, and to see beyond the material world surrounding the poet. As for what to write about, Wordsworth states that poetry can capture any and every subject that is of interest to the mind. What matters is not whether a subject is poetic, but rather, whether the poet can add meaning to a subject and therefore make it poetic. Suddenly, themes from common life can be poetic and worthy of the contemplation Wordsworth requires of the poet. The reason this works, according to his argument, is that those who live a rustic lifestyle are closer to nature—and therefore farther away from vanity bred by artifice.

Next, Wordsworth dives deeper into the function of poetry. Unlike the classicists, who

value art for the sake of art—the idea that art should be produced regardless of any moral values or concerns--Wordsworth and the Romantics believe in art for the sake of life. That is, Wordsworth sees the function of poetry as ennobling the reader through the teaching of moral and philosophical values and ideals.

Finally, Wordsworth discusses in greater depth the diction of poetry. Diction is basically the use of language, but more specifically, it's the choice of words, phrases, sentence structures, and even figurative language. While diction is important in all of literature, Wordsworth places particular importance on its role in poetry because it is the poet's medium. Whereas prose also has characters, setting, and plot to convey a message, the poet's choice of language, or diction, is the sole means of expression in poetry. Despite this, Wordsworth argues that the diction of poetry and prose is the same, and criticizes the neo-classicists for their "artificial" and "unnatural" language. Passion should drive diction, not ornament, dignity or **meter**. He wants poetry to center on rustic, humble situations using rustic, humble language. According to Wordsworth, that is the real source of poetic truth and beauty.

Source: Internet,

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