William Wordsworth & Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems

(1) BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770, in Cockermouth, Cumbria, England. Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight—this experience shapes much of his later work. Wordsworth attended Hawkshead Grammar School, where his love of poetry was firmly established and, it is believed, he made his first attempts at verse. While he was at Hawkshead, Wordsworth's father died leaving him and his four siblings orphans. After Hawkshead, Wordsworth studied at St. John's College in Cambridge and before his final semester, he set out on a walking tour of Europe, an experience that influenced both his poetry and his political sensibilities. While touring Europe, Wordsworth came into contact with the French Revolution. This experience as well as a subsequent period living in France, brought about Wordsworth’s interest and sympathy for the life, troubles and speech of the "common man". These issues proved to be of the utmost importance to Wordsworth’s work. Wordsworth’s earliest poetry was published in 1793 in the collections An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches. While living in France, Wordsworth conceived a daughter, Caroline, out of wedlock; he left France, however, before she was born. In 1802, he returned to France with his sister on a four-week visit to meet Caroline. Later that year, he married Mary Hutchinson, a childhood friend, and they had five children together. In 1812, while living in Grasmere, they grieved the loss of two of their children, Catherine and John, who both died that year.

Equally important in the poetic life of Wordsworth was his 1795 meeting with the poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It was with Coleridge that Wordsworth published the famous Lyrical Ballads in 1798. While the poems themselves are some of the most influential in Western literature, it is the preface to the second edition that remains one of the most important testaments to a poet’s views on both his craft and his place in the world. In the preface Wordsworth writes on the need for “common speech” within poems and argues against the hierarchy of the period which valued epic poetry above the lyric.

Wordsworth’s most famous work, The Prelude (1850), is considered by many to be the crowning achievement of English romanticism. The poem, revised numerous times, chronicles the spiritual life of the poet and marks the birth of a new genre of poetry. Although Wordsworth worked on The Prelude throughout his life, the poem was published posthumously. Wordsworth spent his final years settled at Rydal Mount in England, travelling and continuing his outdoor excursions. Devastated by the death of his daughter Dora in 1847, Wordsworth seemingly lost his will to compose poems. William Wordsworth died at Rydal Mount on April 23, 1850, leaving his wife Mary to publish The Prelude three months later.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a leader of the British Romantic movement, was born on October 21, 1772, in Devonshire, England. His father, a vicar of a parish and master of a grammar school, married twice and had fourteen children. The youngest child in the family, Coleridge was a student at his father's school and an avid reader. After his father died in 1781, Coleridge attended Christ's Hospital School in London, where he met lifelong friend Charles Lamb. While in London, he also befriended a classmate named Tom Evans, who introduced Coleridge to his family. Coleridge fell in love with Tom's older sister Mary.

Coleridge's father had always wanted his son to be a clergyman, so when Coleridge entered Jesus College, University of Cambridge in 1791, he focused on a future in the Church of England. Coleridge's views, however, began to change over the course of his first year at Cambridge. He became a supporter of William Frend, a Fellow at the college whose Unitarian beliefs made him a controversial figure. While at Cambridge, Coleridge also accumulated a large debt, which his brothers eventually had to pay off. Financial problems continued to plague him throughout his life, and he constantly depended on the support of
En route to Wales in June 1794, Coleridge met a student named Robert Southey. Striking an instant friendship, Coleridge postponed his trip for several weeks, and the men shared their philosophical ideas. Influenced by Plato’s *Republic*, they constructed a vision of pantisocracy (equal government by all), which involved emigrating to the New World with ten other families to set up a commune on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. Coleridge and Southey envisioned the men sharing the workload, a great library, philosophical discussions, and freedom of religious and political beliefs.

After finally visiting Wales, Coleridge returned to England to find that Southey had become engaged to a woman named Edith Fricker. As marriage was an integral part of the plan for communal living in the New World, Coleridge decided to marry another Fricker daughter, Sarah. Coleridge wed in 1795, in spite of the fact that he still loved Mary Evans, who was engaged to another man. Coleridge’s marriage was unhappy and he spent much of it apart from his wife. During that period, Coleridge and Southey collaborated on a play titled *The Fall of Robespierre* (1795). While the pantisocracy was still in the planning stages, Southey abandoned the project to pursue his legacy in law. Left without an alternative plan, Coleridge spent the next few years beginning his career as a writer. He never returned to Cambridge to finish his degree.

In 1795 Coleridge befriended William Wordsworth, who greatly influenced Coleridge’s verse. Coleridge, whose early work was celebratory and conventional, began writing in a more natural style. In his "conversation poems," such as 'The Eolian Harp' and 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,' Coleridge used his intimate friends and their experiences as subjects. The following year, Coleridge published his first volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects*, and began the first of ten issues of a liberal political publication entitled *The Watchman*. From 1797 to 1798 he lived near Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, in Somersethshire. In 1798 the two men collaborated on a joint volume of poetry entitled *Lyrical Ballads*. The collection is considered the first great work of the Romantic school of poetry and contains Coleridge’s famous poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

That autumn the two poets traveled to the Continent together. Coleridge spent most of the trip in Germany, studying the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Jakob Boehme, and G.E. Lessing. While there he mastered the German language and began translating. When he returned to England in 1800, he settled with family and friends at Keswick. Over the next two decades Coleridge lectured on literature and philosophy, wrote about religious and political theory, spent two years on the island of Malta as a secretary to the governor in an effort to overcome his poor health and his opium addiction, and lived off of financial donations and grants. Still addicted to opium, he moved in with the physician James Gillman in 1816. In 1817, he published *Biographia Literaria*, which contained his finest literary criticism. He continued to publish poetry and prose, notably *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), *Aids to Reflection* (1825), and *Church and State* (1830). He died in London on July 25, 1834.

(2) TEXT OF WORK
Download the whole of “Lyrical Ballads” (1798 edition) from Project Gutenberg:
http://www.archive.org/details/lyricalballads1709622gut

Read the annotated text of “Advertisement to ‘Lyrical Ballads’” (1798) at:
http://www.bartleby.com/39/35.html


Read the annotated text of “Appendix: ‘By what is usually called Poetic Diction’” (1802) at:
Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems is a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, first published in 1798; it is typically considered to have marked the beginning of the Romantic movement in literature. The immediate effect on critics was modest, but it became and remains a landmark, changing the course of English literature and poetry. Most of the poems in the 1798 edition were written by Wordsworth, with Coleridge contributing only four poems to the collection.

A second edition was published in 1800, in which Wordsworth added additional poems and a preface detailing the pair's avowed poetical principles. Another edition was published in 1802, Wordsworth added an appendix titled Poetic Diction in which he expanded the ideas set forth in the preface. Wordsworth and Coleridge set out to overturn what they considered the priggish, learned and highly sculpted forms of eighteenth century English poetry and bring poetry within the reach of the average man by writing the verses using normal, everyday language. They place an emphasis on the vitality of the living voice that the poor use to express their reality. Using this language also helps point out the universality of man's emotions. Even the title of the collection recalls rustic forms of art - the word "lyrical" links the poems with the ancient rustic bards and lends an air of spontaneity, while "ballads" are an oral mode of storytelling used by the common people.

In his famous "Preface" (1800, revised 1802) Wordsworth explained his poetical concept: "The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purpose of poetic pleasure."

If the experiment with vernacular language was not enough of a departure from the norm, the focus on simple, uneducated country people as the subject of poetry was a signal shift to modern literature. One of the main themes of "Lyrical Ballads" is the return to the original state of nature, in which man led a purer and more innocent existence. Wordsworth subscribed to Rousseau's belief that man was essentially good and was corrupted by the influence of society. This may be linked with the sentiments spreading through Europe just prior to the French Revolution.

Both poets feared that readers might find their poems too experimental and that critics would disapprove of them. Coleridge even went so far as to say: 'Wordsworth's name is nothing, to a large number of persons mine stinks!' They were, however, determined to publish and the book appeared in September 1798 but without their names on the title page. Their fears were not entirely unfounded, readers did find the style and subject matter challenging and so, in 1802, Wordsworth wrote the Preface to Lyrical Ballads setting out their aims and ideas.

The Title. The two words in the title stem from different traditions in the history of poetry, and have different characteristics. By combining them in the title, Wordsworth and Coleridge indicated that they were involved in a fresh interpretation of old traditions. Lyric. In ancient Greece, a lyric was a song to accompany music from a lyre (a stringed instrument). Later the word was used for any short poem in which personal moods and emotions were expressed. Nowadays the words of popular songs are called lyrics. Ballad. A ballad is a poem or song which usually tells a story in the popular language of the day, and has associations with traditional folk culture.

Some key points paraphrased into English from Dizdar’s “Poezija engleskog romantizma”:
- Wordsworth described simple events or everyday feeling hoping to bring out their special & specific
meaning;
- moved to Europe and traveled around a good deal, observing nature; he realized that nature has a 
  delayed effect on the senses, i.e. the poet’s first encounter with nature does not necessarily have to 
  provoke strong emotion in the poet but the poetic procedure occurs subsequently, when the senses 
  assume the “glorious beauty of nature” (104);
- his political consciousness was awoken in France, during the September Massacre of Robespierre’s 
  revolutionary gov’t; however, he later moved away from the ideas of revolution and joined Coleridge in 
  adopting a view of “philosophic idealism and political conservatism” (105);
- “Lyrical Ballads” are a sort of theoretical manifesto of English Romanticism (105);
- note on Wordsworth: more so than any other Romantic poet, he felt the loss of poetic imagination fairly 
  early and compensated by editing and revising his earlier work (107);
- the theoretical postulates of “Lyrical Ballads” signaled to the audience that his poems should be 
  considered experiments; his approach is democratic, he relies on the language of the middle and lower 
  classes, i.e. the language of everyday speech and conversation (108);
- his poems are based on real events or accounts of real events as told to him by his friends and 
  presented through his own poetic imagination;
- Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s proclaimed goal of “Lyrical Ballads”: truth, imagination & 
  transformation of reality; their work is, according to Coleridge divided as follows: for Coleridge – work 
  directed to supernatural or romantic persons and characters so as to “transfer from inward nature 
  human interest [and the re]semblance of truth”, and create a “suspension of disbelief for the moment”, 
  i.e. create “poetic faith”. (Coleridge, qtd. by Dizdar 109);
- the “Preface” is, in fact, a “systematic defence of the theory upon which the Poems were written” 
  (Wordsworth, qtd. by Dizdar 109);
- his topics are from everyday life but colored with poetic imagination; the language used is important!
- Wordsworth discards the accomplishments of previous generations & expands the understanding of 
  poet and poetry (110);
- he calls poetic expression regenerative & cyclical (like nature), not same and eternal;
- his poetry is natural (i.e. springs from nature as a source), and is a rebellion against established poetic 
  canons (111);
- nature for Wordsworth is “moral inspiration” (112) and provides comfort, especially in times of need;
- the human spirit and nature are in constant interaction: “As much as nature affects the spirit by its 
  existence, so does it actively relate to its own perception of nature and the moral attitude which it 
  upgrades in this interaction of spirit with nature and itself, with man as a spiritual and moral being” 
  (direct quote translated from the Bosnian, 113);
- nature is seen as a source of knowledge, “magistra vitae”, as more deep and original than the 
  academic (which is considered by Wordsworth to be a fake attempt at explaining the world we live in, 
  i.e. nature is the world we live in, and self-explanatory) (114);
- from all this follows that the spiritual transformation (and transformation of reality mentioned 
  previously) is effected by nature (115);
- the title “Lyrical Ballads” explains the duality of Wordsworth’s topics (refer back to explanation of 
  what is ‘lyrical” and what is a ‘ballad’).

(Dizdar)
(4) SOURCES CITED


(5) RECOMMENDED READING


(An excellent, comprehensive critical source on the life and work of Wordsworth, closely examining influences on his philosophy, ideology and poetry. Includes excerpts from works for clarification and exemplification of claims made. Essential for understanding Wordsworth as a poet of nature.)


(A detailed critical analysis of Wordsworth and Coleridge's work, contextualized in detail with the social, historical and cultural background of the Romantic period. Also includes a detailed note on the development of Romanticism and its precursors.)