SELECTED READINGS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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SELECTED READINGS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

EARTH HAS NOT ANYTHING TO SHOW MORE FAIR

Composed upon Westminster Bridge on September 3, 1802, this is one of the better known of Wordsworth's numerous sonnets. Here is a vivid picture of a beautiful morning in London, while the silence awakened Wordsworth's religious belief and made him think of God. The language used is simple and effective.

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep²
In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still³!

NOTES

- 1. This sonnet follows strictly the Italian or Petrarchan form, with the rimescheme abba, abba, cdcdcd and the clear division between the octave and the sestet.
 - 2. steep bathe, shine on.
- 3. all that mighty heart is lying still Here "mighty heart" refers to the earth.

THE SOLITARY REAPER'

Here is a poem by Wordsworth in which the author describes vividly and sympathetically a young peasant girl working in the fields and singing as she works. It was based upon an actual personal experience of the peet at one of his tours.

Behold her, single in the field, Yon solitary Highland² Lass! Reaping and singing by herself; Stop here, or gently pass! Alone she cuts and binds the grain, And sings a melancholy strain³; O listen! for the Vale profound Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt⁴
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands⁵:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard,
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides⁶.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—Perhaps the plaintive numbers⁷ flow For old, unhappy, far-off things, And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay⁸, Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang As if her song could have no ending; I saw her singing at her work, And o'er the sickle bending; — I listened, motionless and still; And, as I mounted up the hill, The music in my heart I bore, Long after it was heard no more.

NOTES

- 1. The poem contains four eight-lined stanzas of iambic verse. Most of the lines in each stanza are octosyllabics. The rime-scheme for each stanza is ababacid.
 - 2. Highland belonging to the Highlands or the northern part of Scotland.
 - 3, a melancholy strain a sad tune.
 - 4. chaunt old spelling for "chant".
 - 5. Arabian sands the deserts in Arabia.
 - 6. Hebrides a group of islands off the northwestern coast of Scotland.
 - 7. the plaintive numbers the mournful verses (referring to her song).
 - 8. lay a short lyrical or narrative poem meant to be sung.

THE DAFFODILS

This is one of the many poems written by Wordsworth on the beauty of nature. There is a vivid picture of the daffodils here, mixed with the poet's philosophical and somewhat mystical thoughts.

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 of² 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 Way³,
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.

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Outdid 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 mood⁴,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

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NOTES

- 1. This poem contains four six-lined stanzas of iambic tetrametre, with a rime scheme of ababec in each stanza.
 - 2. a host of a great number of.
- 3. the Milky Way a broad belt of faint light, consisting of countless stars too faint to be seen separately and shining like a river across the sky at night (银河, 天河).
- 4. In vacant or in pensive mood in an unthinking mood or in a seriously thoughtful mood.

LINES WRITTEN ABOVE TINTERN ABBEY

(Excerpt: Lines 1 — 93)

The full title of the poem is Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye² during a Tour. In the poem Wordsworth tries to express his attitude toward the external world

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of nature and to show the effect of nature upon his life and philosophy, and he finds something mysterious in nature that leads to God or religious mysticism. The excerpt given below contains about the first half of the poem. Here the poet begins by showing his great delight in the enjoyment of beautiful natural scenery, but he proceeds to preach his idealist philosophical view on the mystical effect of nature upon the human soul.

Five years have past; five summers, with the length Of five long winters! and again I hear AMON Wy - These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs With a soft inland murmur. - Once again Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs, That on a wild secluded scene impress Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect The landscape with the quiet of the sky. The day is come when I again repose Here, under this dark sycamore, and view These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts, Mich at this season, with their unripe fruits, Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves 'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms, Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke Sent up, in silence, from among the trees! With some uncertain notice,3 as might seem Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,

Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them

Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire

The hermit sits alone.

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In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; Hoove too rody And passing even into my purer mind, With tranquil restoration: - feelings too Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps, As have no slight or trivial influence On that best portion of a good man's life, His little, nameless, unremembered acts Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust, To them I may have owed another gift,6 Of aspect more sublime;7 that blessed mood, In which the burthen⁸ of the mystery, In which the heavy and the weary weight Of all this unintelligible world, Is lightened: — that serene and blessed mood In which the affections gently lead us on, -Until, the breath of this corporeal frame9 And even the motion of our human blood Almost suspended, we are laid asleep In body, and become a living soul: While with an eye made quiet by the power Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, We see into the life of things.

If this

Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft-In darkness and amid the many shapes -Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir Unprofitable, 10 and the fever of the world, 11 Have hung upon the beatings of my heart -How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee, O sylvan¹² Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods. How often has my spirit turned to thee!

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,18 With many recognitions dim and faint, And somewhat of a sad perplexity,14 The picture of the mind revives again: While here I stand, not only with the sense Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts That in this moment there is life and food For future years. And so I dare to hope, Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first I came among these hills; when like a roe I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams, Wherever nature led: more like a man Flying from something that he dreads, than one Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days, And their glad animal movements all gone by) To me was all in all. — I cannot paint What then I was. The sounding cataract Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock, The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,

Their colours and their forms, were then to me

Unborrowed from the eye. — That time is past, And all its aching joys¹⁶ are now no more,

An appetite; 15 a feeling and a love, That had no need of a remoter charm, By thought supplied, nor any interest

And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn, nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes¹⁷

Loss Sari

Containatant

He rees voture delferently because to in different.

The still, sad music of humanity,

Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power

To chasten and subdue. 18 = the wid feeting to had had

NOTES

- This poem was written in blank verse (i.e., unrhymed iambic pentametre).
 Tintern Abbey a ruin in Monmouthshire that had been a monastery.
- 2. the Wye a river in East Wales and West England.
- 3. notice intimation, announcement.
- 4. These beauteous forms referring to the scenery described above: the hedge-rows, the pastoral farms, wreaths of smoke among the trees, etc.
 - 5. with tranquil restoration with my spirits restored to quietude.
- 6. To them I may have owed another gift Here "them" refers back to the "beauteous forms" mentioned above.
 - 7. of aspect more sublime of a more sublime appearance.
 - 8. burthen (archaic) burden.
 - 9. this corporeal frame here referring to the human body.
- the fretful stir / Unprofitable human activity both vexatious and pointless.
 - 11. the fever of the world worldly desires and passions.
 - 12. sylvan silvan, meaning: wooded.
- 13. with gleams of half-extinguished thought i.e., when the thought about this secular life grew dim.
- 14. of a sad perplexity (the mind) in a state of being perplexed by the mysteries of human life that leads to sadness.
- 15. Their colours and their forms, were then to me/An appetite The colours and forms of the cataract, the tall rock, the mountain and the deep and gloomy wood seemed to me at that time something that I hungered for, that I strongly desired.
 - 16. aching joys intense feelings of joy.
 - 17. oftentimes many times, frequently.
- 18. The still, sad music of humanity ... to chasten and subdue These few lines show the author believed that nature had a moral and spiritual significance and helped him to understand the mystery of human life. "chasten" to purify the human soul; "subdue" to bring into refinement.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE KUBLA KHAN'

Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream is said to have been composed in the summer of 1797. The poet dropped asleep after taking an anodyne which was prescribed to him for his health. He was reading from an old book of travels entitled Purchas his Pilgrimage the following passage: "In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately palace, encompassing sixteen miles of plain ground with a wall, wherein are fertile meadows, pleasant springs, delightful streams, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure." According to Coleridge, he "continued for about three hours in profound sleep" and "during which time ... he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines". The author went on to say that on awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that ... with the exception of eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast. So the poem was left a fragment.

Although the greater part of the fragment has to do with Kubla Khan and his pleasure-dome, the mention of "an Abyssinian maid" playing "on her dulcimer" and "singing of Mount Abora" seems to be entirely extraneous material. Thus the poem has no coherent meaning and is wrapped up in an atmosphere of the supernatural and the fantastic. However, the poetic imagery and the haunting melody in the poem have attracted many students of English literature.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

of Alphens revier of pocks in a piraten Also nier of life, ending is death

deme - notte amalical, human, nel Ryptany

of travelles late S. China

So twice five miles of fertile ground With walls and towers were girdled round: And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,4 Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree; And here were forests ancient as the hills, Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. Ingin fairer,

lite - basie But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted creative pero. Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!5 great person A savage place! as holy and enchanted Super attrad As e'er beneath a waning moon6 was haunted By woman wailing for her demon-lover!7 And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething, As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing A mighty fountain momently was forced:8 Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail, Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail: And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever It flung up momently the sacred river. Five miles meandering with a mazy motion Through wood and dale the sacred river ran, Then reached the caverns measureless to man. And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far threat was a fine threat was a fine start of the dame of pleasure The shadow of the dome of pleasure Floated midway on the waves;

Where was heard the mingled measure¹⁰ From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,

turned A secon To

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice! Engy of the transfer on belief the imagination on

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