

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

William Wordsworth was, along with his friend and associate Samuel Taylor Coleridge, responsible for truly ushering in the Romantic Age of English poetry. While Wordsworth is now probably the least read and studied of the Romantic English poets, his influence upon the age of Romantic poetry is beyond measure or debate. His unique and revolutionary poetic work—especially his early poetry—had a pronounced influence upon nearly every poet and thinker of the Romantic Age, especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Wordsworth grew up in Northwest England, in what is known as the Lake District. Introduced to the poetry of Shakespeare and Milton at a young age, Wordsworth developed an early appreciation for and understanding of poetry. While his early life and education were rather traditional, Wordsworth's intellectual and emotional life truly came alive during his 1791 visit to Revolutionary France, where he aligned himself with the Republican movement and fell in love with a French woman who would give birth to his daughter. Political conflict between England and France forced Wordsworth back to England and estranged him from his lover and daughter for the next several years, events that haunted him and led him into a stark depression that fueled much of his early and most powerful poetic work.

Along with his sister Dorothy, who would prove to have an enormous influence on the development of his poetry, thanks to her diary recordings of their shared travels and discussions, Wordsworth moved to Somerset in 1797. While in Somerset, Wordsworth was only a few miles away from the home of his close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Together, Wordsworth and Coleridge would compose the first major revolutionary text of the Romantic Age, *Lyrical Ballads*. The book was a monumental collection of poems by the two authors that would prove to be the guiding poetic force for the first and second generations of English Romantic poets. In his famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth called for a new type of English poetry that was to be written in “the real language of men” and was to serve, always, to highlight and explore “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Much of Wordsworth's poetry—and particularly his poems “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” and his great work *The Prelude*—took his own memories and powerful emotions as primary subjects and focused on the sort of themes that would later be pursued by a variety of other Romantic English poets, including the relationship between man and nature, death, grief, and the nature of the sublime.

While many agree that his poetry declined in quality during the later years of his life, and his political beliefs became increasingly conservative, Wordsworth served as the English poet laureate from 1843 until his death in 1850 and was considered by many to be amongst the finest English poets of the 18th and 19th centuries.