

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

She Dwelt among the Untródden Ways

She dwelt among the untródden ways
 Beside the springs of Dove,⁵
 A Maid whom there were none to praise
 And very few to love:

5 A violet by a mossy stone
 Half hidden from the eye!
 —Fair as a star, when only one
 Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
 10 When Lucy ceased to be;
 But she is in her grave, and, oh,
 The difference to me!

1800

Did Lucy actually live? Was she a friend of the poet? We don't know; the poem doesn't tell us, and even biographers of Wordsworth are unsure. What we do know is that Wordsworth was able to represent grief very powerfully. Whether the speaker is the historical Wordsworth or not, that speaker is a major focus of the poem, and it is his feelings that the poem isolates and expresses. We need to recognize some characteristics of the speaker and be sensitive to his feelings for the poem to work.

Analyzing Speakers: An Exercise

In the following poem, we do not get a full sense of the speaker until well into the poem. As you read, try to imagine the tone of voice you think this person would use. Exactly when do you begin to know what she sounds like?

DOROTHY PARKER

A Certain Lady

Oh, I can smile for you, and tilt my head,
 And drink your rushing words with eager lips,
 And paint my mouth for you a fragrant red,
 And trace your brows with tutored "nger-tips.

5 When you rehearse your list of loves to me,
 Oh, I can laugh and marvel, rapturous-eyed.
 And you laugh back, nor can you ever see
 The thousand little deaths my heart has died.

5. Small stream in the Lake District in northern England, near where Wordsworth lived.

And you believe, so well I know my part,
 10 That I am gay as morning, light as snow,
 And all the straining things within my heart
 You'll never know.
 Oh, I can laugh and listen, when we meet,
 And you bring tales of fresh adventurings—
 15 Of ladies delicately indiscreet,
 Of lingering hands, and gently whispered things.
 And you are pleased with me, and strive anew
 To sing me sagas of your late delights.
 Thus do you want me—marveling, gay, and true—
 20 Nor do you see my staring eyes of nights.
 And when, in search of novelty, you stray,
 Oh, I can kiss you blithely as you go . . .
 And what goes on, my love, while you're away,
 You'll never know.

1937

To whom does the speaker seem to be talking? What sort of person is he? How do you feel about him? Which habits and attitudes of his do you like least? How soon can you tell that the speaker is not altogether happy about his conversation and conduct? In what tone of voice would you read the first twenty-two lines aloud? What attitude would you try to express toward the person spoken to? What tone would you use for the last two lines? How would you describe the speaker's personality? What aspects of her behavior are most crucial to the poem's effect?

. . .

The poems we have looked at in this chapter—and those that follow—all suggest the value of beginning the reading of any poem with three simple questions: Who is speaking? What do we know about him or her? What kind of person is she or he? Putting together the evidence that the poem presents in answer to such questions can often take us a long way into the poem. For some poems, such questions won't help a great deal because the speaking voice is too indistinct or the character too scantily presented. But starting with such questions will often lead you toward the central experience the poem offers.

POEMS FOR FURTHER STUDY

WALT WHITMAN

I celebrate myself, and sing myself

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
 And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.