

Reading for Information



Use with Selected Poetry
by Percy Bysshe Shelley
page 860.



READING 9B Explain how authors writing on the same issue reached different conclusions because of differences in assumptions, evidence, reasoning, and viewpoints. **9C** Make and defend subtle inferences and complex conclusions about the ideas in text and their organizational patterns. **9D** Synthesize ideas and make logical connections among multiple texts representing similar or different genres and technical sources and support those findings with textual evidence.

Views on Poetry

- Book Preface, page 875
- Literary Essay, page 876

Many of the romantic poets knew each other personally, and many shared similar beliefs about art and politics. But, as individual artists, they disagreed with one another about the purpose and definition of poetry. Their differences in opinion were not dry or theoretical. They were vital differences that informed and animated their work, giving each poet a distinctive style and voice. For example, nature is a subject in the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley, but it is impossible to confuse Wordsworth's elegant meditations on the English countryside with Shelley's soaring, ecstatic odes.

In the following selections—excerpts from Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*—we hear, directly from the poets, two different views on poetry. They tell us what poetry means to them, and what they think poetry can accomplish. As you read the excerpts, carefully consider the assumptions each poet makes about art and the world, paying special attention of their choice of words, or diction, and imagery.

Skills Focus: Compare and Contrast

Comparing and contrasting two works often helps you understand them better than if you had read each work on its own. In order to identify similarities and differences between two works, focus on the key words and phrases each author uses to convey his or her ideas so you can identify each writer's main idea. Focusing on these key elements gives you the tools you need to make logical connections, or **inferences**, about each text. You can then use these inferences to synthesize, or combine, ideas from both texts to draw your own conclusions about them.

Use the chart below to keep track of the key words and phrases that each writer uses to define poetry and its purpose, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and metaphors. First read each excerpt in its entirety. Then compare the excerpts side-by-side as you fill out the chart.

Words and Phrases about Poetry in Wordsworth	Words and Phrases about Poetry in Shelley
"...choose incidents and situations from common life..." (lines 1–2)	"Poetry is indeed something divine" (line 1)

Wordsworth included this preface, or introduction, to the 1802 edition of his and Coleridge's groundbreaking collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*. It describes what Wordsworth believed are the essential elements of poetry, many of which served as the foundation for romanticism.

from

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, with *Pastoral and Other Poems*

William Wordsworth

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously¹, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic² life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in
10 which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate³ from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what
20 appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly,
such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious⁴ habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.⁵

A COMPARE AND CONTRAST

In lines 8–17, what central features of romanticism does rural life represent?

B COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Reread lines 17–22. What kind of language does Wordsworth think is best suited to poetry? Why?

C COMPARE AND CONTRAST

To what kind of poetic language does Wordsworth object in lines 22–28? Why?

1. **ostentatiously** (ös-těn-tä´shəs lē): in a showy manner.

2. **rustic** (rūs´tĭk): relating to country life.

3. **germinate** (jūr´mə-nāt): sprout or grow.

4. **capricious** (kə-prĭsh´əs): impulsive.

5. **[From Wordsworth's text]** It is worthwhile here to observe that the affecting parts of Chaucer are almost always expressed in language pure and universally intelligible even to this day.

Shelley wrote *A Defense of Poetry* in 1821 after reading a composition in which friend and fellow poet Thomas Love Peacock jokingly claimed that poetry no longer had a place in society. Because it seemed to Shelley that this view was in fact becoming widely held, he made a passionate argument for the value of poets and poetry.

from
A Defense of Poetry

Percy Bysshe Shelley

D COMPARE AND CONTRAST

How does Shelley define poetry in lines 1–2?

E COMPARE AND CONTRAST

What language does Shelley use in lines 18–21 to describe poetry’s transformative power?

POETRY is indeed something divine. It is at once the center and circumference of knowledge; . . . Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.” The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are
10 unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. . . **D**

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation¹ of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy² turns to potable³ gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of
20 familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms. **E**

1. **incarnation** (ín’kār-nā’shən): appearance in earthly form.

2. **alchemy** (ăl’kə-mē): chemical reaction.

3. **potable** (pō’tə-bəl): drinkable.



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Comprehension

- 1. Recall** According to Wordsworth, how does rural life influence poetry?
- 2. Clarify** Why does Wordsworth favor “simple and unelaborated expressions” (lines 22–28)?
- 3. Recall** How does Shelley define creativity in the first paragraph of *A Defense of Poetry*?
- 4. Clarify** According to Shelley in lines 15–21, what is poetry’s purpose?

Critical Analysis

- 5. Analyze Author’s Message** What elements does Wordsworth consider essential to poetry? Why?
- 6. Analyze Style** How does Shelley’s diction, or choice of specific words, reflect his views about poetry?

Reading for Information: Draw Conclusions

WRITING PROMPT

In an essay, compare how Wordsworth and Shelley define what poetry is and what it does. Highlight the most noticeable similarities and differences between these definitions. Then choose one poem by either Wordsworth (pages 800–808) or Shelley (pages 862–871). Discuss how specific features of the author’s definition of poetry do or do not apply to one of his own poems. Support your opinion with direct quotations from the two excerpts and the poem.

To answer this prompt, follow these steps:

- 1. Review the chart you filled in as you compared and contrasted the excerpts.** Look for the most noticeable similarities and differences you have listed. Where do Wordsworth and Shelley’s definitions differ most? Develop a thesis statement based on your findings.
- 2. Incorporate examples, based on the key words and phrases from your chart, to support your thesis.**
- 3. It is helpful to organize your essay by first discussing the excerpts’ similarities, then their differences. Then, synthesize these ideas to determine how each author defines poetry. Apply your conclusions to one of the author’s poems.**

