

# Presentation of the city in poetry

Profession, Poet



**Pre-1914 Poetry: Comparative Study**

**Compare the ways in which the city is presented in William Blake's 'London' (1794) and William Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802'.**

In your response you should consider:

- The techniques that the poets use to convey their impressions of the city.
- The way(s) in which the poets include references to social, political and personal concerns and the extent to which the poems are shaped by these.

By 1800, London was the biggest city in the world, with a population of over one million. It was a global centre of power and imperial glory, set against a backdrop of revolution. Although William Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802' and William Blake's 'London' (1794) both concern the city of London and were written in the same period, they present the city in very different ways. 'Westminster Bridge' is in celebration of the city's majesty and is rarely bitter, Wordsworth only ever writes disparagingly of its citizens. In 'London' however, Blake who was himself a resident of London, presents the city as a place crawling with corruption and rife with disease. In this essay I will explore the structure, form and setting of the poems, the poems' main themes, language and imagery, how the poems portray people and society in London and the sights and sounds of the city, in order to compare in depth the different ways in which the city is presented.

The poem 'London' comprises four quatrain stanzas, written in iambic tetrameter. Each stanza offers a view of various aspects of the city as seen by the narrator on his "wander" (line 1). 'Westminster Bridge' is an Italian

sonnet, which is a single fourteen-line stanza. It is written in iambic pentameter. Traditionally, the sonnet form is associated with love poems, and indeed 'Westminster Bridge' could fall under this classification. The poem is metaphorically divided into two parts, an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet. It is conventional for the octave to offer the description or problem and the sestet the resolution. In 'Westminster Bridge', Wordsworth uses the octave to detail the scene laid out before him, "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie" (line 6), and the sestet to describe his emotions, "Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!" (line 11). 'London' was published in 'Songs of Experience', one of Blake's anthologies. As the anthology's title suggests, 'London' represents Blake's personal experience, and so the first person dominates, "I wander through each chartered street" (line 1). This reinforces that the issues presented in 'London' are of personal concern to Blake. Similarly, 'Westminster Bridge' is written in the first person, as it is a personal experience being composed by Wordsworth at the very moment that he beholds the described scene. However, it does not dominate the poem to the same extent as it does 'London'. Wordsworth also makes use of the third person, "The river glideth at his own sweet will" (line 12). He does this as he describes his emotions in order to make clear that the experience manifests itself as open to all who would care to observe it, rather than using the rather selfish alternative, "The river glideth at my own sweet will". The rhyme scheme of 'London' is ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH, for example "street, flow, meet, woe" (stanza 1). This conveys a sense of control, authority and monotony, which is also echoed in the poem's language. The meter is rarely interrupted, the poem continues with one

criticism and revelation after another in order to emphasise the extent and number of the problems that exist, not wanting to dwell on any one point as if treating them with disgust. ' Westminster Bridge' conforms loosely to the ABBAABBACDCDCD rhyme scheme of the Italian sonnet. The rhythm is more often interrupted, with variety of punctuation and enjambement creating changes in the flow. " Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;" (line 13), is an example of a caesura which enhances this moment of epiphany in which Wordsworth realises that the tranquillity of the scene is such that the even the houses appear to be sleeping. Alternatively, this exclamation could literally be Wordsworth expressing his thankfulness to God for the scene. In examining an extract from Wordsworth's ' The Prelude', I believe it is sensible to assume that the exclamation ' Dear God!' is a spiritual reaction because he uses " guardian saints" (line 179) in a simile describing fronts of houses in London. Indeed, Wordsworth was a religious man who said in 1812 that he was " willing to shed his blood for the Church of England". It could also be an echo of line 2, " Dull would he be of soul who could pass by", a criticism of those who are asleep and not recognising the true splendour that the city can offer. Aside, it is also very important to consider the time setting of the poems as it has a direct influence on how the city is portrayed. As ' London' is set at midnight, the image of a dark, sordid London is carried through, " midnight streets" (line 13), which gives an image of the alleys where unbridled or promiscuous activities may take place. ' London' is not capturing a particular moment in time but more of a journey through life, " In every cry of every man / In every infant's cry of fear" (lines 5-6). This is so because it demonstrates not only suffering across the demographics of

London, but also across time. The idea of a journey through time is also illustrated in the original engraving of the poem, which shows a young boy pleading with a crippled old man. ' Westminster Bridge' by contrast captures a single moment in time on September 2nd 1802 and is set during the early morning, at sunrise, " The beauty of the morning" (line 5). This allows Wordsworth to see the city quite literally in its best light, " Never did the sun more beautifully steep" (line 9), giving the greatest opportunity for the synthesis of nature and the city.

Political and social issues, shape the poems heavily, particularly ' London'. Blake focuses quite intently on political issues, specifically in the third stanza. " Every blackening church appalls," (line 10) refers to the industrial revolution. This line highlights Blake's adversity toward the revolution. Blake grew up in London and so this might be the reason for his rejection of the change in society, but I find the example he gives particularly interesting because he was noted as being a dissenter, rejecting the Church of England, yet he highlights how the traditional religion of the country is being damaged by industry. Alternatively it may refer to his disgust at the infrequent cleansing of the city, which has instead been left to perish and degenerate. The mere association of the church with corruption is incongruous. Blake also attacks the monarchy in stanza three, " And the hapless soldier's sigh / Runs in blood down Palace walls" (lines 11-12). The phrase " hapless soldier" refers to one of many ill-fated soldiers who were sent off by the country to wage war, often against their will and without any care being given to them for their troubles. Despite providing an invaluable service in protecting the country, the monarchy saw soldiers as mere pawns in the ' game' of war,

insignificant, indistinguishable and easily replaced. The other thing noted to “run in blood down palace walls” is the “chimney-sweeper’s cry”, which is similarly ignored by the monarchy. Blake particularly despised the slave trade and so he felt strongly about such matters not being addressed by the country’s leaders. “Palace” could equally refer to the houses of parliament, with criticism falling squarely on the shoulders of politicians rather than the monarchy. The criticism of the Church and monarchy is a common theme in Blake’s poems, for example in ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ (ii) from the same anthology in which ‘London’ was published, ‘Songs of Experience’, Blake writes “And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery” (lines 11-12). “And are gone”, refers to the parents of a chimney sweeper, who have abandoned him. The narrator condemns God and the King for having tried to glorify his miserable existence by false promises of a great life, which have not panned out. In the first stanza, he describes the streets and the river Thames as “chartered” (lines 1 and 2). The word chartered, which is repeated, likely refers to the exclusive and executive nature of the streets. Chartered literally means ‘having special privileges’, and so Blake is probably referring to the great number of wealthy businesses in London, garnering money and turning profit, juxtaposed with the ‘weakness’, ‘woe’ and poverty of those on the street. Wordsworth also makes this contrast when he describes London in ‘The Prelude’, “The wealth, the bustle and the eagerness / The glittering chariots with their pampered steeds”, (lines 161-162) and “The scavenger that begs with hat in hand” (line 164). ‘Chartered’ may also refer to the fact that the streets are well known and well trodden, mapped, chartered. ‘Westminster Bridge’ makes

passing reference to the industrial revolution, “ All bright and glittering in the smokeless air” (line 8). This line conveys a sense of freshness and purity with ‘ smokeless’ suggesting that the morning air is free of the industrial pollution that is so apparent during the day. Wordsworth’s view of the industrial revolution is very different to that of Blake because he acknowledges in this line how nature and man are able to co-exist in the city. In the final line, “ And all that mighty heart is lying still!” (line 14). Wordsworth refers to the British Empire, which by 1802 was at its peak. London, being the UK’s capital, formed the ‘ heart’ of the Empire in a political sense. This personification reinforces the idea that London formed a vital organ of the Empire’s ‘ body’, and so it is particularly notable that Wordsworth describes London as lying still because it really emphasises the tranquillity of the scene. “ Mighty heart” is also a particularly effective metaphor for a city because it is a concentrated area of bustling activity during the day akin to a ‘ machine’. ‘ Westminster Bridge’ is more shaped by personal concerns rather than social and political concerns.

In ‘ London’ Blake describes the London set during the industrial revolution and the effects that it has had on society as people part with tradition and become helpless. In stanza two the anaphora, “ In every... In every... In every...”, acts to emphasise the universal nature of the suffering and sorrow. One of the most striking metaphors in ‘ London’ is “ mind-forged manacles” (line 8). It refers to the social restrictions induced by life in the city, resonating with the poem’s rhyme scheme. I find “ mind-forged” to be especially interesting because it suggests that these “ manacles” do not in fact exist but are the cultivated in the minds of the people. Blake is

suggesting that the people of London bend to conform to the power and control of authority, where this is not necessary. “mind-forged” seems to suggest the subversion of the people’s power, attitudes of defiance and non-conformity, perhaps even stretching to suggestion of a breakdown of democracy and freedom of speech. The phrase implies that the “manacles”, which are “shackles that consist of metal loops that can be locked around the wrist”, have been imposed by some figure of authority. The juxtaposition of the “mind-forged” and “manacles” thus conflates he who is suppressed and he who has acted to suppress. Wordsworth gives glancing insights into what he thinks of the society in London, “Dull would he be of soul who could pass by” (line 2). Interestingly this is one of the only moments in ‘Westminster Bridge’ that could be construed as critical or bitter, showing contempt for anyone who does not appreciate the sight. Or perhaps Wordsworth is rationalising his overly emotional reaction, which could be interpreted as effeminate, by justifying that anyone who didn’t react in this way would be ‘dull’. Amplifying what little insight Wordsworth gives into society in London with information from an extract from Wordsworth’s ‘The Prelude’, in which he describes his experience in London when he was 18, I feel that Wordsworth’s view of society in London is in agreement with that of Blake. “The endless stream of men and moving things” (line 159), implies loss of identity in London, which compliments “manacles” in ‘London’. Blake notes “marks of weakness, marks of woe” (line 4) in “every face” he meets. The repetition of mark gives emphasis to the “weakness” and “woe”, Blake could have quite easily chosen to use more diverse language but the harsh repeated sound of “marks” really enhances the image. “Marks” tends to



suggest that these are aberrations that have not always existed but have recently appeared as a result of changes in London, the industrial revolution perhaps. The last stanza bears a few very striking images that give further insight into people and society in London. “ How the youthful harlot’s curse” (line 14), refers to the rise of prostitution. It is particularly shocking to hear that it is a “ youthful” harlot, it appears that even the youths of society have been corrupted and subverted, having to turn to prostitution in order to scratch a living in such desperate times. “ curse” refers to the spread of venerable disease as a result of such activities. This “ curse” is described as blasting “ the newborn infant’s tear” and blighting “ with plagues the marriage hearse” (line 16). The oxymoron “ marriage hearse”, ends the poem with a very strong image, starkly juxtaposing the charm of marriage with the hearse, used to carry a dead person to the place of burial. Blake himself condemned the absurdity of marriage without love and this is reflected in marriage hearse because any relationship resulting out of an encounter with the “ youthful harlot” would like be a relationship without true love. Alternatively, “ marriage hearse”, could refer to a social restriction as “ mind-forged manacles” does, that is to say that marriage is as a man’s death, once he has committed to it he no longer has the same free will to do as he please. The strong plosive constants of “ but, blasts blights and plagues” emphasises the harshness of what is being described.

Wordsworth uses rich descriptions of the sights and sounds of London. He is in great admiration of the beauty of London and starts the poem with a superlative, hyperbolic tone. “ Earth has not anything to show more fair” (line 1), suggesting that this is the epitome of beauty on Earth. I find the

simile, “ The City now doth, like a garment, wear” (line 4), particularly interesting as it indicates the morning sky appears to surround the city as a garment does a body, tending to suggest that the tranquillity of the morning is cloaking the true nature of the city which is perhaps less appealing. In ‘ London’ Blake describes the grim sounds he hears in order to imbue the poem with a mood of pathos. For example in stanza two, “ In every cry of every man / In every infant’s cry of fear / In every voice, in every ban” (lines 5-7), the repetition of cry across the two generations is striking, and the choice of “ infant” is particularly shocking. This idea can be found in Blake’s poem ‘ Infant Sorrow’ from ‘ Songs of Experience’ which links closely with ‘ London’, “ Into the dangerous world I leapt / Helpless, naked, piping loud” (lines 2-3). “ piping loud” corresponds with the cries of fear, “ dangerous world” with idea that the suffering is universal in London. In ‘ Westminster Bridge’, Wordsworth celebrates the wondrous variety of London by asyndeton, “ Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie” (line 6). These images bring together the components of the Empire and variety within London, with “ ships” signifying trade, “ towers” business, “ domes” St. Paul’s, an icon of London, “ theatres” entertainment, and “ temples” religion. In ‘ London’ however, Blake sees the same “ marks” in every face, the same generic cries in every voice. As ‘ Westminster Bridge’ is romantic poetry Wordsworth integrates nature and the city because the reconciliation of man and nature is a key tenet of Romanticism, as pioneered by Wordsworth himself. The features listed in line 6 are described as lying “ open unto the fields and to the sky;” (line 7). This appropriation of the city in a pastoral context refers to how the rural-urban fringes of London would be more

apparent in 1802 because it was a smaller city. Wordsworth is saying that the city is in truth not so far removed from nature as some may believe and in fact they can co-exist in perfect harmony. He also highlights how man and nature harmonise, “ The river glideth at his own sweet will” (line 12), implies that the scene appears to conform to Wordsworth wishes, flowing past so gently in a way that completes the scene as if just to please his own wishes. In contrast “ Near where the chartered Thames does flow” (line 2) in ‘ London’, ravages the idea of the calm flowing Thames by associating it with “ chartered”, implying that is over run by commercial usage, to satisfy the greed of wealthy city businessmen. In order to show the extent to which Wordsworth feels positively about the city, if “ not anything to show more fair” (line 1), was indeed not praise enough, he compares the sight of the city to things of nature, furthering the synthesis of nature and the city. “ Never did sun more beautifully steep” (line 9), gives an image of the sun glinting on the roofs of the buildings as it slowly rises over the cityscape, imbuing and saturating it with natural light, and is enhanced by the sibilance of “ sun” and “ steep”. In the line, “ In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill; / Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!” (line 10), Wordsworth directly compares the cityscape with valleys, rocks and hills but concludes that he has never felt so touched and calmed by any of these scenes so much as he is by the calmness of the city. This is particularly notable bearing in mind that Wordsworth lived in the countryside and enjoyed nature, yet finds the conflation of the city and nature to be more beautiful than any purely natural experience. However, the idea that this is fleeting moment, “ The city now doth” (line 4), reminds us that despite the fact that it looks good at this

moment, it will not last. This sort of naïve expression of joy is seen in Blake's poem 'Infant Joy', from 'Songs of Innocence'. "Sweet joy befall thee" (line 12), is the adult's hope for the child's wish for joy to be fulfilled but in "befall" there is a grim acknowledgement of how such joy will probably not be achieved.

In conclusion I find William Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802' and William Blake's 'London' to present London in very different ways. 'Westminster Bridge' is panegyric, a love poem to the City with a tone of exultation and infatuation with the beauty of the scene that befalls him. The way in which it appropriates London in a pastoral context and integrates the city and nature is a refreshing vantage point considering the political and social issues of the time. 'London' however appears to describe an entirely different London to Wordsworth because of Blake's focus on political issues. Overall, I find Blake's vision to be the most convincing because of how the poem is written as a first person experience by a citizen of London who is able to most appropriately empathise with people facing adversity and compare how the city has changed over time rather than capturing a single moment as Wordsworth does. The poems are both shaped by political and social concerns but Blake's 'London' draws on social and political issues much more than 'Westminster Bridge', particularly focussing on the industrial revolution's impact on society in London, whereas only passing references are made in 'Westminster Bridge' which is shaped to a much greater extent by personal emotional concerns of the moment. These personal concerns are fleeting and short-lived because once the

garment of the morning has been hung up, the underlying problems become apparent once again.

### **Bibliography**

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