

# Wordsworth and blake: the plight of mankind



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William Wordsworth and William Blake were both distraught by the plight of man in the early nineteenth century. Their separate but somewhat unified visions of man's problems are displayed in their poems "Lines Written in Early Spring," (lines 5-24) and "London," respectively. They both make use of several poetic devices in very different manners to convey nearly the same meaning. Each poet uses the mood of his poem to show how deep in strife man truly is, though the tone of each poem vastly contrasts with the other. Both Blake and Wordsworth also link man to another entity, and each also use meter and rhyme scheme to show the same. Stylistically, the poems are extremely dissimilar, and the contents of each are tremendously unlike, but ultimately, they both point out the same issues with which man is dealing. Wordsworth's "Lines" sets the tone immediately by setting the reader in a pleasant situation and using peaceful imagery. The reader is brought to a grove in which the writer is observing Nature; the birds "hopped and played" (13), which "seemed a thrill of pleasure" (16), and "The budding twigs spread out their fan/To catch the breezy air" (17). He works at illustrating the joy and serenity around him while only hinting at the much darker plight of man without spelling it out, without even coming close to breaking the tone he has so carefully constructed. In fact, because he purposely avoids saying exactly what it is that "man has made of man" (8), he allows the reader to imagine the entire quandary on his own, and in contrast to the peaceable surroundings at the grove, the reader is very likely to imagine the worst. Blake, on the other hand, uses harsh and tragic imagery to convey just how harsh and tragic the world was. While Wordsworth's tactic was to use soft imagery to show how troubled man was, Blake utilizes severe imagery to show the same. He writes that the "hapless

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Soldier's sigh/Runs in blood down Palace walls" (11), and makes use twice of infants crying (6, 15). He uses words that press upon the reader images of being ruled, of being oppressed. The minds of the working class men are shackled, and the streets and the river themselves are "chartered," or sanctioned by the ruling class. He juxtaposes the words 'marriage' and 'hearse' in the last line, as the final two words of the poem, to show that everything that once stood for life and happiness now means death and sadness. While Wordsworth subtly hints at the problems man has imposed upon himself, Blake forces them upon the reader so that the point cannot be missed. One of the most vivid images Blake brings into play is that of the "black'ning church" (10). It is crucial that one takes into account the meanings of this line. The word 'black'ning' functions as both transitive and intransitive. The church is both becoming more blackened and working as a blackening agent to the people, such as the chimney sweeper in the preceding line. The church, or those who run the church, are not doing their jobs in the world that Blake is depicting. The church is associated with the elitist ruling class, and the church itself is becoming filthy, covered with the soot of oppression while dishing it out, perpetuating the ruling class tyranny. Wordsworth also brings God into his poem and comments upon His role in the world he is describing. In "Lines," man is tied to Nature, and Nature to God. Every element in Wordsworth's poem is enjoying the simple act of being. When he writes in the last stanza, "If this belief from heaven be sent/If such be Nature's holy plan/Have I not reason to lament/What man has made of man?" (21), he is saying clearly that though we are intended to live as Nature lives, man is not doing so, hence his sadness. We are not following the plan. In both poems, God is being disobeyed, and it is in part this

disobedience that is causing so much discord, though perhaps it is said more explicitly by Blake than Wordsworth. In writing about Nature enjoying the act of being, Wordsworth is doing more than just showing that we are not following God's plan. He is also showing the link between man and Nature through personification. He writes that "...every flower/Enjoys the air it breathes" (11), and that the branches "...spread out their fan/To catch the breezy air"(17). Earlier, in saying that Nature is linked to "The human soul that through me ran" (6), he is later showing how there is a little human soul in every movement and action of Nature, such as in the acts of the flower enjoying breathing and the twigs finding pleasure in the breeze. He is writing about how things should be, and simply stating that they are not. Blake, on the other hand, writes bluntly about what is, and does not bother with how things should be. He does this by linking the working man to the institution of the elitist oppressing upper class. Blake strategically capitalizes only particular words in his poem. Every word he capitalizes is either a member of the rural class ("Infants" (6), "Chimney-sweepers" (9), "Harlot's" (14)) or a symbol for the overpowering aristocracy ("Thames" (2), "Church" (10), "Palace" (12)). He is showing subtly that man and the institution are in direct opposition to one another, and by capitalizing them, he is giving them both the power to dominate. Both poets link man with another entity in order to show a problem in the system. Blake and Wordsworth also use their language to help express the crisis of man. Blake uses complex wording to reflect the complexity of the problems. He is trying to depict a world in which the rapidly industrializing economy is corrupting and poisoning everything with which it comes into contact. He uses lines such as "mind-forged manacles" (8), which is a complicated and terrible thought conveyed in a

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mere two words, and “ Every black’ning Church appalls” (10), which is also a complicated line, being that it can have more than one meaning. He urges the reader to stop and think about what he is saying, and not to take it lightly. His metaphors are stark and violent, and his lines move quickly and seem almost rushed. This parallels how he feels about man’s plight. It is difficult, violent, and is continuing to grow at a rapid pace. Wordsworth, however, uses simple language to show that the problem we have is simple at its base. He uses very a very basic vocabulary to portray very basic imagery; in fact he uses only one word in the entire poem that is more than two syllables. The reader does not need more than this in order to see that a problem exists, particularly since Wordsworth wants the reader to envision the problem in his own way. More complex words might invite a more complex image, which the poet does not want. He merely wants to show that man is not in accordance with his roots, which is a simple idea that can be expressed in a simple manner. The roots themselves are simple, being that man should enjoy life for what it is, and not make anything else of mankind. The meter and rhyme scheme of both poems are also very simple, both being written in iambic pentameter nearly the entire way through, and each sharing an ABAB rhyme scheme. These alternate rhyming lines in “ London” serve to perpetuate the monotony and repetitive predictability of the circle of suffering in the city. However, the meter in the poem is not consistent throughout, beginning with iambic pentameter and then veering towards less conventional trochaic pentameter at line 9, but returning to iambic pentameter for the final line. This is to assist in showing that everything is not as it should be; the world is in discord. Though Blake makes tremendous effort to show ‘ how things are,’ he makes an effort here to show that this is

not how they should be. Things just don't make sense as they are.

Wordsworth uses the same sort of strategy in "Lines" as does Blake. Each verse is written in iambic pentameter, with the same simple rhyme scheme as "London." However, the final and fourth line of every stanza is written in iambic tetrameter, being a foot short of the rest of the verse. This leaves the reader feeling somewhat dissatisfied, feeling as if something is missing, that there should be something more. Wordsworth does this for the same reason that Blake does it; to subtly let the reader know that something really isn't right. It leaves the reader with a sensation of discontent, perhaps even near frustration, and causes further thought upon the poem, which is what both poets had planned. It can be seen through these often subtle and sometimes blatant poetic devices that both Blake and Wordsworth are trying to convey to the reader that there is an underlying problem facing mankind. Though they go about it in contrasting ways, the means with which they portray their particular ideas are the same. Through imagery, tone, and meter, among other tactics, each shows in his own way that there is something very wrong with man in this particular time setting.