

Compare and control
the environment
portrayed in the
poems london and
sonnet



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‘ Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains’. Rousseau. This quote can relate to both of the poems ‘ London’ by William Blake and ‘ Sonnet’ by John Clare. The poet William Blake greatly admired the French philosopher, Rousseau, and he has made it particularly evident in his poem ‘ London’.

However the ideas portrayed in John Clare’s ‘ Sonnet’ contradict Rousseau’s statement. Both of these poems describe environments and landscapes, creating contrasting images through the poets’ use of descriptive language which is both vivid and imaginative. In the poem ‘ London’, Blake describes a journey around the city of London and offers the readers a view of the terrible conditions that the inhabitants of the city have to face. Some of the topics explored in the poem are: restrictive laws of property, child labour and prostitution. The poem begins by criticizing the laws which relate to ownership. By saying the ‘ charter’d Thames’ Blake is referring to the fact that every aspect of life is owned in London, even the river which is often a symbol of freedom, and an emblem of the power of nature in other poems.

Blake also criticizes religion and all of its failures. In his life he rejected religion for various reasons and one of the main ones was the failure of the Church for not helping the children in London, who were forced to work. In the poem the reader’s attention is drawn to the ‘ chimney sweepers cry’ and the ‘ every black’ning church’ walls, which implies that the church, as an institution, was unwilling and inactive to help those in need. The ‘ blackening’ church walls also link to the running of ‘ blood down palace walls’ which could in turn link to the French revolution, which suggests that if conditions don’t change, the people may revolt. The poem then ends with the terrible consequences that are to be faced as a result of sexually

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transmitted diseases and prostitution, which is foreseen to damage the future of people physically and spiritually.

‘How the youthful Harlot’s curse” London’ is almost a prophecy of the terrible consequences of the future, unless changes are made in the city and to society as a whole. Blake was born on the 28th of November 1757 and lived and worked in the capital, so I believe he was well placed to write about the conditions that people who lived there faced. ‘I wander through each chartered street, near where the chartered Thames does flow, and mark in every face I meet, Marks of weakness, marks of woe.’ (ll. 1, 2) John Clare’s ‘Sonnet’, is about the joy and delight of the arrival of summer; ‘I love to see the summer beaming forth’.

and it describes a beautiful landscape and summer sights by a lake. ‘I love to see the wild flowers come again’. (L. 3) Sonnets are often associated with love and Clare’s ‘Sonnet’ is about love- not the love of a person, but of the summer and countryside.

One reason for Clare’s use of the sonnet form may be to highlight his passion for the subject: that he cares deeply about it as he would a lover. Some themes explored in the poem are: Light- the scene is very bright and colourful. e. g. ‘white clouds’ ‘gold mare blobs’ ‘whitening lilies’ ‘bright beetles’ ‘bright day’. Joy- the joy that Clare feels at the returning of summer and the joy he sees around him ‘insects are happy’ ‘beetles play’ ‘summer beams forth’.

And Rebirth- nature is being reborn as summer comes ‘wild flowers have come again’ insects are busy pollinating the meadow plants and the moor
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hen has built a nest for her young. Clare was born on the 13 July 1793. He had a very difficult life and was admitted to an asylum, because he suffered with depression, in 1837. He died on the 20th may 1864 in the asylum. Although the poem was written in 1841 (A year in which he tried to escape from the asylum but was recaptured), it gives no hint of the pressure he might have been under. The poem is almost wistful; perhaps he was trying to escape from his awful present to his memory of the simple pleasures of nature.

The poem may also be thankful; as if to say Clare's mental health problems did not always stop him from enjoying the simple things in life. 'The clear deep lake to stand upon its shore I love the hay grass when the flower swings That sport about the meadow that bright day'. Both poems use different tones to engage the reader and highlight the themes and ideas suggested in them. London explores the harshness and difficulties of the city and the failures of religion and law. Sonnet talks of the country and the beauty of summer and life. The poems are both structured in different ways, to suit the themes evoked in the poems.

The use of language also differs between the two poems. 'London' is in a collection of Blake's poems called the Songs of Experience, which are intended to provide contrast and illustrate the effects of modern life on people and nature. As the title of the collection suggests ' London' is presented in a very regular way, like a song. There is a strict abab rhyme scheme throughout the poem. There are four, four lined stanzas. These stanzas are like snapshots seen by Blake during his ' wander thro' the streets, and offer a glimpse of different aspects of the city.

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“ How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry, Every blackening Church appalls, And the hapless Soldier’s sigh, Runs in blood down Palace walls.” ‘ Sonnet’ is written in verse form which was developed in Italy in the 14th century, but still used today. There are 14 lines. The poem is iambic with a steady weak, strong, rhythm which echoes the beat of our heart. The poem is built up in rhyming couplets which seems to give us an enclosed vision of a particular image ‘ I love to see the summer beaming forth, And the white wool sack clouds sailing to the north’.

The rhyming couplets also refer to the fact that it is said god needed 7 days to create the world and there are 7 rhyming couplets in the poem. The language used in ‘ Sonnet’ is quite simple. The title is simple and so is the vocabulary. There is a lot of repetition used in the poem like the words ‘ I Love’ and ‘ clear’ and ‘ bright’. This emphasizes the innocence of nature through its brightness and clearness, and the power of love.

Simple language is used to convey simple pleasures and this is reflected in the poem with the use of words like ‘ mare’ and ‘ flags’ which are used instead of their more formal names. This may be because of vernacular language as Clare would have spoken with a North Hampton shire accent. This poem contains no formal punctuation, which is unusual for the time it was written. However, most phrases finish at the end of a line due to the lack of punctuation. I feel that this also contributes to the simple feel of the poem.

It also seems to suggest an idea of freedom and lack of constraint. Because of the lack of punctuation the lines flow into each other and give us an idea

of the poet being so desperate to pour out his love he does not have time to pause. There is a lot of imagery in the poem and this helps the readers to visualize the scene in their minds and see the view that Clare sketches out for us. We can also hear the reeds rustling and feel the summer winds due to the poet's use of the senses- hearing and touch. This helps the reader to relate better to the poet and help us see things through his eyes." Where reed clumps rustle like a wind shook wood".

(L. 6)The poem appeals to our senses. Alliteration is used with W and R sounds in this line and it seems to be copying the sounds of the wind whistling through the rushes. While reading the poem we get an impression that we are zooming in to the scene from a distance, first looking at the clouds and then the flowers and moor hens.

The poem then ends by giving us a close-up image of water beetles " in the clear lake play". The poet is bringing us closer to nature throughout the poem. In ' London' the tone is at times biblical and reflects Blake's strong opinions on religion. Blake uses repetition twice in the first stanza. First the word charter'd which is a reference to the charters that owed ownership and rights to certain people. Blake saw this as robbing ordinary people of their rights and freedoms.

" I wander through each chartered street," (L. 1)The second repeated word is " marks". This could mean two things. It could refer to the actual physical marks that people carried as a result of the conditions they had to endure or of Blake ' marking' evidence during his walk through the city streets. " Marks of weakness, marks of woe." In stanza two, in the first three lines, the word "

every” is repeated and this seems that the poet is trying to make it clear that “ every” one is affected by the problems faced.

Also it’s like everyone’s minds are restricted and confined through the ‘ mind-forg’d manacles’- That the city has taken away their will to think. “ In every voice, in every ban, The mind-forged manacles I hear:” The poem is very pessimistic and filled with many negative words like ‘ cry’ ‘ fear’ and ‘ blood’ Sounds are important in the poem and represent the great noises of the city as the poet “ wanders thro” it. There are cries, the sound of “ mind-forg’d manacle” and curses. These sounds are all the result of anguish and pain. The poem then closes with a surprising contrast in language- “ marriage hearse”.

Marriage is a celebration of the beginning of new life and love. However, it is written with the word hearse and so it reveals that the poet believes that the only outcome of the future is death and decay. Both poems use very different styles of language. Sonnet is an optimistic poem and with a lot of hope and happiness. London is very pessimistic, devoid of hope for the future.