

500 word  
commentary on west  
london



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Matthew Arnold critical commentary West London raises multiple literary observations. These include the type of language used, the structure of the poem and the use of poetic techniques, such as imagery. The first striking feature is the rhyming structure that follows the criteria of an Italian sonnet, with a slight variant in the last tercet. This can be seen as Arnold attempting to tweak the model to emphasise the final three lines. This ending can be interpreted as the heightened and emotionally charged culmination of feelings of the central characters.

The Italian sonnet commonly produces a statement followed by a counter statement, by means of an octave, which consists of two quatrains, followed by a sestet which is displayed by two tercets. This poem conforms as the first two quatrains provide negatively charged language, such as “ ill,” (“ West London” 2) and, “ their feet were bare. ” (West London” 4) The mood of the poem shifts dramatically after the turn and the language changes, suggesting that Arnold is deliberately showing the reader opposite attitudes.

This is evident by, “ this spirit towers,” (“ West London” 9) and “ she will not ask of aliens, but of friends. ” (“ West London” 10) The use of the turn can be seen as an attempt to show the readers the complexity of the situation on the streets of London, during this era of industrialisation. This is further explained by the two quatrains, which display a common view of the homeless, while the sestet provides a romantic and humble image of gratitude, evidenced by how the girl, “ begg'd and came back satisfied,” (“ West London” 7) from the passing labour workers.

The poem finishes with the image of the unfortunate girl that, “ points us to a better time than ours,” (“ West London” 14) which can indicate the level of

ignorance of passers by. It also suggests a sense of untold experiences, due to social neglect. Various prominent images run throughout the poem. One example can be seen on lines six and seven with the girl begging the workers, which can be used in conjunction with, “ of sharers in a common human fate. (“ West London” 11) These images indicate a type of alienation the lower classes feel, when compared to wealthier members of society. This image is used aptly with the image on line eight, “ the rich she had let pass with frozen stare. ” (“ West London” 8) This can be seen as Arnold deliberately exposing the ignorance of the wealthy. This sentence is the shortest of all in the poem, which indicates a definitive response. Another notable image can be seen on line nine, “ above her state this spirit towers. ” (“ West London” 9) This is the most powerful image of the entire poem.

Arnold deliberately uses such emphatic language to conjure this image, on the pivotal first line of the turn, to demonstrate the strength of the human spirit. This image also alludes to the idea of the towering human spirit contesting the new skyscraper buildings that claimed the landscape of London during the nineteenth century. West London is full of unique imagery, and carefully selected language, for its time period. Arnold uses an Italian sonnet structure to speak about controversial issues, in a style readers would have been familiar with.