COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE

Earth hath not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This city now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

William Wordsworth.
September 3rd., 1802

IN MODERN LANGUAGE

There is nothing more beautiful to be seen on Earth;
A person would have to be very insensitive to ignore
Such a majestic and touching sight.
The city, now, wears the beauty of the morning,
as if it’s a garment; silent and bare
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie open to the fields and the sky.
They are all bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
The early-morning sun has never shone so beautifully on valley, rock or hill;
I never saw of felt such a deep sense of calm!
The river glides along where it wants to go:
Dear God! Even the houses seem asleep
And the mighty heart of the city is lying still.
LONDON

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.

How the chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every black’ning Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot’s curse
Blasts the new born Infant’s tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

William Blake.
1794

MODERN VERSION

I wander through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames flows
And notice in every face I meet
Signs of weakness, and signs of misery.

In every shout/cry of every man
In every child’s cry of fear
In every voice and in every curse
I hear the mental handcuffs.
(This metaphor could mean that people are not free to think.)

The cries of chimney-sweepers
Shock the church whose walls are turning black;
And the sigh of an unfortunate soldier
Runs in blood down the walls of the Palace.

But the worst things I hear are in the streets at midnight
How the child prostitute swears and
Shouts at her crying baby
And spoils with disease the marriage hearse.
“COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE” AND “LONDON”

- Both poets writing around the same time. Poems written within eight years of each other. Totally different views of the same city.
- Blake lived in London: Wordsworth spent most of his life in the countryside, particularly the Lake District. Much of his poetry about the beauties, healing abilities of Nature. Unusual for him to write about the town.
- Blake was a visionary and a mystic. Although he was religious in his own way, he was very much against the conventional ideas put forward by the Church.
- Wordsworth was a Pantheist. That is, he worshipped Nature and saw its beauties as the ultimate sign of God’s work on earth, so his seeing beauty in the city, something essentially man-made, is unusual.

WESTMINSTER BRIDGE

- Wordsworth’s poem is a sonnet. (Poem of fourteen lines, written in regular metre of Iambic Pentameters {Lines of ten syllables}.)
- Wordsworth, visiting the city of London, sees a scene of great beauty, as he looks at the city in the early morning, before it is awake and busy.
- Poem opens with the statement that there is nothing more beautiful to be seen on earth. This, from a poet who had described the glories of the Lake District, Scotland, etc., is unusual.
- He goes on to say that it would be a hard person who could not appreciate this sight. Use of “touching”?
- He then goes on to personify the city, wearing the morning’s beauty, like a “garment”.
- A description follows of the sights and buildings he can see. Note the use of “open”, “fields” and “sky”. Is this what we normally associate with a city? How are these things described? Note that the air is “smokeless”.
- Wordsworth then goes on to compare what he sees with the beauties of nature – the sun never shone more beautifully on natural things than it does on London at this time of the day.
- Wordsworth uses “never” several times to emphasise how exceptional he finds his experience, and its effect on his emotions and feelings.
- The River Thames is also personified, and seems to be enjoying itself, meandering where it chooses, in a leisurely way.
- An exclamation and more personification follows, as the houses seem asleep, and the city’s heart is lying still. Pun here, too.
Poem written in four regular stanzas of four lines each, with very regular ABAB rhyme scheme. Measured, repetitive rhythm gives a feeling of the inexorable march of misery (woe) and unhappiness through the city.

In the first stanza, the word “charter’d” is used to describe both the streets and the River Thames. It means a freedom given to a city, but does Blake see it as such? If not, what is he using, here? Compare the different views of the Thames.

Mark (note) the use of the word “mark”, in lines 3 and 4. What does it mean, and, again, what is this an example of? What effect does it have?

What is Blake saying about the inhabitants of London and their lives?

In the second stanza, Blake dwells on the misery evident from the cries and shouts to be heard. Whose?

Repetition of “every” adds to the hammer-like beat, as he pounds through the feelings of misery.

Both children and grown men cry and swearing and cursing can be heard. (A “ban” is a curse.)

In the fourth line of the stanza, Blake again refers to freedom, by speaking of “mind-forged manacles”, a manacle being a handcuff. Is he talking about the lack of freedom of thought and the constraints that people feel are placed upon them by authority?

In the third stanza, the reference to the chimney-sweeper’s cry refers to the child labour of the time, when young children were sent up into chimneys to clean them and often died in the attempt.

The next line refers to the “black’ning church”, and could be taken in two ways. Church could be turning black, because of pollution, soot, etc., or it could be having the effect of blackening life for people. As mentioned previously, Blake took a dim view of the church and of organised religion.

Appalled. What does Blake mean? Is the Church appalled at the child labour or does he mean it should be appalled?

Britain was engaged in the Napoleonic Wars at this time, and Blake sympathises with the soldiers who were involved in a war which was not of their making. The soldiers’ blood is on the hands of the monarchy, for whose benefit they were fighting.

Final stanza. Blake talks about how prostitutes ply their trade on the midnight streets. Think of all the connotations of “midnight”. The poet refers to child prostitution, against which there were no safeguards in those days. The young girl curses the child she has borne as a result of her occupation; the child is not born of, or into, love.

The last line is ambiguous. It could refer to sexually transmitted diseases, caught as a result of the prostitution, or it could simply refer to the sterility of a loveless marriage. Whatever is meant, it is a harrowing and disturbing image.
“LONDON POEMS” SOME THINGS TO THINK AND TALK ABOUT.

You will be working in pairs. In turns, read the two poems. Perhaps each of you could read them both, seeing if a different reading helps you to see anything new.

As always, think about:

- Content. What is each poem about? How are they alike? How do they differ?
- How are they written? Is there a rhyme or a rhythm? If so, does the rhythm suit the content? Does the structure also contribute? How?
- Tone/mood? What is the mood of each?
- How do the poets differ in their descriptions of London? What does each poet emphasise? Are there any similarities, or would you not believe that they are talking about the same city? Why?
- Find examples of some of the things that Wordsworth found pleasant. How does he tell us how lovely he finds the city at this time of the morning?
- Look at Blake’s poem. Which unpleasant images do you find particularly striking or upsetting?
- Are there any similes, metaphors, examples of Personification etc?
- Are there any words or phrases that you don’t understand? Can you work out what they mean, between you? Use a dictionary, or the notes at the back of the book, to help you.
- Which poem do you prefer? What do you like/dislike about the poems? Which is easier to understand?