

**University of Toronto**

**Critical Essay**

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## London in William Blake and Wordsworth's poetry

The British Romantic era is identified by the tumultuous years of the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars, and the Industrial Revolution. It was an age when Britain experienced drastic political, social, religious, and literary changes. The Romantic era is defined as a period of contradictions with a great collective awareness amongst the revolutionaries and workers, the disenfranchised poor women, anti-slavery activists, and the increasing ideology of human individualism (The Age of Romanticism XXXII). Given the radical changes of the Romantic era, an extraordinary number of lasting works of literature were produced during this time. The profound effects of the French and Industrial Revolution bleed into the works of the Romantic poets and writers. William Blake and William Wordsworth are among the most prominent Romantic writers whose work was influenced by England's changing political, social, and religious structure. The poets were concerned with the way London was receiving the brunt of these changes and how it was receding into unrecognition. This essay will discuss how William Blake's poem "London" and Wordsworth's poem "London 1802" highlight the deteriorating state of London as a result of the Industrial Revolution and political contradictions. Blake is bitterly critical of London's decline and uses strong imagery, symbolism, and metaphors to convey his sentiments. In contrast, Wordsworth's approach is more contemplative and didactic; however, it also criticizes London's state and the need to stop the ruin of the city.

William Blake was born in 1757 in Soho, London, where he lived most of his life. Given that Blake was born and raised in London, he had a great love for the city. For Blake, London was almost a holy city, and England itself was particularly divine. In the preface to *Milton* (1804), Blake links ancient England to Christ and as a land worthy of being the new

Jerusalem (LV). Hence, the changes that England as a whole and London in particular experienced after the French and Industrial Revolutions were a cause of great concern to Blake. Blake's poem "London" was first published in Blake's book of poetry *Songs of Experience* in 1794 to express his distress over the state of the city of London at that time. Iterating his 'experience,' Blake becomes the poem's narrator by using 'I' to start his poem. Thus, he means to show his audience the vision of London as he sees it from his own eyes. Like most of Blake's poetry, "London" has a simple form and meter. There are four quatrain stanzas, and it is written in iambic tetrameter and follows an ABAB rhyme scheme. The poem's simple meter and rhyme scheme give it a feeling of a walk. The AB-AB rhyme is like a footstep up and footstep down when walking. This links it to the use of the first-person speaker and Blake's intention of showing the audience his view of London as he goes for a walk through the city and "wander thro' each charter'd street" (Blake 1).

The use of the word 'charter'd' in the first line and then repeated in the second introduces the imagery of bondage, a lack of freedom, and oppression in the city. Chartered used with the word wander creates irony in these lines. Wander in Oxford English Dictionary is defined as "of persons or animals: to be (in motion) without control or direction." The irony is that although the speaker is walking on the streets of London freely, there is no freedom because the streets of London itself are chartered and not free. The lack of freedom references the decadent and oppressive response of the British government to the revolution in France. For instance, in 1794, the same year when Blake published his *Songs of Experience*, the British government suspended the "rights of habeas corpus – which required the state to show legitimate cause for imprisonment and carry out trials on time. As a result, those accused for crimes could be held for an indefinite period" (The Age of Romanticism LIII). The oppression and lack of freedom are

evident in the faces of the people the speaker passes by. It is also worth noting that Blake uses faces and not people or persons. Moreover, Blake repeats 'mark' three times in lines 3 and 4 to emphasize the weariness he sees on people's faces. The repetition of the mark to describe the faces dehumanizes the people he meets on the street and presents them as objects, highlighting the injustices emerging from the commercial exploitation of a materialistic society.

In the second, third, and fourth stanza, Blake provides auditory imagery using diction such as cry, sigh, voice, and hear. The chimney sweepers cry in stanza 3 has significant meaning as it highlights the poverty that many children in London were living in at that time. The cry of the chimney-sweeper is both literal and figurative. The chimney-sweep children would announce their presence in the area loudly to get work. However, Blake is implying a deeper figurative meaning by criticizing the oppression and poverty in England that is forcing young children to work in dangerous conditions to survive. Many of these children died due to a lack of safety measures while climbing up to clean chimneys or contracted illnesses from the unsanitary conditions. The alliteration of the 'ch' sound in chimney and church combined with the alliteration of 'bl' in blackening and blood is used to identify the real culprits of the suffering of the people – the church and the monarchy. The color black is a strong image in stanza 3. The chimney sweep boys were often covered in black soot. The color of black soot is then transferred onto the Church "the blackening Church appalls" (Blake 10). It shows that the church is tainted with shame because it failed to protect these children and is embroiled in politics and corruption. The black color is also a reminder of the physical pollution overtaking London due to the advent of machinery during the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, the color black against the red blood that runs down the palace wall is also a highly striking image. The color red is the color of the British monarchy and royalty. By associating this color with blood, Blake is criticizing the

British monarchy and underlining the fact that the monarchy is responsible for the deaths of the chimney-sweep children and the soldiers who have been deployed in wars as well as the innocents killed.

The black and gothic imagery continues in the final stanza. The final stanza is set in the late hours of the night where everything is dark "but most thro' midnight streets I hear" (13). The continuation of the blackness and darkness symbolizes the corrupted morals of society as a result of poverty, political instability, and repression of freedom of thought. The final stanza is also packed with powerful images like the cursing Harlot, blighted marriages, and blasting tears of babies. It is interesting to note that Blake does not use cry again to describe the crying of the infants and the fury of the harlot women. Instead, Blake writes, "how the youthful Harlot's curse / Blasts the newborn Infant's tear" (Blake 14-15). By not choosing 'cry' again as he repeatedly did in stanza 2 and 3, Blake shifts the poem's tone from lamenting to exasperated fury and frustration. The words 'blasts' and 'blights' reflect this fury and point towards the violence that emerged from riots and protests in London.

The shift in tone emphasizes Blake's prophetic warning that there will be an uprising and revolution after suffering. People's freedom and rights cannot be repressed for a long time. For Blake, his holy city of London is crying for things to change for the better while warning of the dark consequences if the conditions of its residents do not improve.

William Wordsworth also expresses similar sentiments in his poem "London 1802" and mourns the decline of English society. Wordsworth wrote and published "London 1802" in *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807, shortly after returning from France amidst the French Revolution. Wordsworth's time in France in 1791-92 "awakened his radical sentiments, and he was swept up in the heady excitement that followed the French Revolution" (William

Wordsworth 355). Upon his return to England, Wordsworth was a divided man, and he was stunned at England's pursuit of materialistic gains and the abandonment of nature and wisdom. In a letter to Isabelle Fenwick, Wordsworth writes, "I could not but be struck, as here described, with the vanity and parade of our own country, especially in the great towns and cities, as contrasted with the quiet, and I may say the desolation, that the revolution had produced in France" (Behrendt 656). Thus, "London 1802" expresses Wordsworth's disillusionment with the urban superficiality of London in the nineteenth century.

Wordsworth wrote "London 1802," when London was at the crux of the Industrial Revolution. England was marked by chaotic technological progress, political and structural changes, and growth. In contrast to London's disorderly and chaotic scene, Wordsworth's poem "London 1802" is composed as a sonnet in fixed iambic pentameter. The strict meter and form of this poem are reminiscent of the order and calm of the pre-Industrial life in London and protest against the ongoing Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. The sonnet form and meter of the poem are also an ode to John Milton and his poetry. Wordsworth begins his poem. The first line of the "London 1802" invokes Milton; "Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour". John Milton also wrote a lot of his work during a time of religious and political instability in London. In "The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth (1660), Milton had chastised contemporary backsliders for placing personal considerations before the nation's good in a time of crisis" (Behrendt 655). In "London 1802," as well Wordsworth criticizes the selfishness of the English society. In Line 6-7, Wordsworth says; "Of inward happiness. We are selfish men; / Oh! raise us, return to us again." 'Of inward happiness' suggests that the society of London has become preoccupied with their personal material gains and there is a loss of nationalism. Moreover, 'of inward happiness' also indicates the lack of inner peace and

spirituality due to materialism. That is why line 7 implores Milton's return. It is worth noting that Wordsworth uses 'return' in line 7 as this gives Milton a Jesus persona who will redeem and resurrect those who are powerless to help themselves (655). By doing this, Wordsworth elevates Milton as not only an exemplary poet whose works were quintessential for London at his time. Wordsworth also emphasizes the power of poetry and literature and its profound impact on a country's revival.

Wordsworth's establishment of the importance of poetry comes after his initial observation and disappointment of the decline of literature. In lines 2-3, he writes, "England hath need of thee: she is a fen / Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen." Need of thee refers to needing Milton to save England. *Fen* is defined as a low marshy body of water. It is also defined as dirt and filth in the Oxford dictionary. Here, Wordsworth is referring to the physically deteriorating structure of London. Similar to how Blake condemns pollution and the state of poverty on the streets of London, Wordsworth is also describing London as 'fen' or as dirty due to physical pollution as a result of the Industrial Revolution. However, unlike much of Wordsworth's poetry that compares the urban to the natural world, in "London 1802," Wordsworth maintains a more philosophical and didactic approach. In line 3, Wordsworth states that England is not just a fen (a low-lying marshy water body here) but a fen of stagnant waters. Stagnant water is a powerful image here as the reader's mind immediately conjures up the image of a polluted waterbody. Stagnant water here is a reference to the dumping of industrial waste and pollutants in the Thames River during the nineteenth century. A stagnant water body is also host to a multitude of bacteria and diseases. Life-threatening diseases and illnesses were rampant in London in the nineteenth century as there were no policies in place to check the pollution emissions or to regulate the use of harmful and toxic substances in industrial production.

Moreover, Wordsworth's use of stagnant water to describe the city of London is also ironic. It is ironic because London was anything but stagnant at that time and was pulsating with change and progress. However, in true Romantic fashion, the more London changes and progress, the more it recedes and loses. For Wordsworth, this loss is of "altar, sword, and pen," which is a loss of religious values, military and monarchical power, and the decline of the country's literary achievements.

After witnessing the early days of the French Revolution in France, Wordsworth famously wrote of it later, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive!" (The Age of Romanticism LII).

However, in England, the British government was swift in repressing any trickling sentiments of revolution. This failure of the British government to embrace the principles of freedom is what Wordsworth is referring to in lines 3-5. The "altar, sword, and pen" in stagnant waters suggests that England has come to a standstill in its definition of freedom. The fundamental pillars of religion, monarchy, and literature that constitute a nation's success have become corrupt and polluted like the dirty and polluted waters of the Thames. Moreover, in line 5, the word 'forfeit' implies that England has not simply lost its past grandeur and power but given it up voluntarily as a result of its repressive political and religious policies. This Wordsworth calls upon the intercession of Milton (an embodiment of Jesus) to "give us manners, virtue, freedom, power" (Wordsworth 8). It is interesting to note that manners are foremost on Wordsworth's list.

Manners and social etiquettes played an important role in nineteenth-century English society and laid the foundations of inclusion and exclusion into respectable society. However, here I think manners refer to the compassion and empathy the people of England need to employ in their daily lives to become less selfish. Instead of manners being a dictation of how a superficial urban



society should be, Miltonian manners that Wordsworth wishes to bring back refers to the kindness and care for each other that helps unify a nation and push it towards real progress.

Blake's and Wordsworth's poems convey the poet's sentiments at the decline of the city of London and its society. Blake focuses more on London's physical and visible destruction, and Wordsworth is more concerned about the nation's spiritual, artistic, and moral integrity. By idolizing Milton, he wishes to return England to its pre-industrial glory. William Blake and Wordsworth are amongst the most prominent Romantic poets. Romantic poets were primarily concerned with change and revolution. They were also advocates of individual freedom and were fascinated by the individual's response to an experience of reality. Blake's "London" recounts the state of the city as he sees it in reality, and Wordsworth's "London 1802" is a response to his experience of the French Revolution during his time in France. For the Romantics, nature became a driving force in the construction and description of individual experiences that formed the basis of larger themes. Therefore both "London" and "London 1802" address the loss of the natural environment of London as Industrial Revolution takes over England. At the same time, both poems also explore the social, moral, and religious impacts of change and revolution in nineteenth-century England. However, I think the subject matter of these poems is relevant for any evolving society at any point in time, and Blake's and Wordsworth's poems can be helpful in the modern world as well as they warn humanity to alter their destructive ways before they have to face its dire consequences.

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