Composed upon Westminster Bridge,

POEM TEXT

Earth has not any thing 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!

SUMMARY

No sight on Earth is more beautiful than the view from Westminster Bridge. In fact, only someone suffering from a severe spiritual deficiency could walk by without noticing the view, which is emotionally stirring in its all-encompassing magnificence. London is wearing the clear, soft light of dawn like a piece of clothing. Undisturbed by human activity, the city's many different buildings stretch outward and upward, until they blend into the surrounding farmland and overarching sky. The city shines like a diamond, and the air is clear. The sunlight has never shone on any feature of the natural landscape more beautifully than it now shines on the city as a whole. I've never seen nor felt such pure and unwavering tranquility. The river flows easily, guided only by the forces of nature. My God, even the houses seem like they're sleeping. The whole city is like a single, immensely powerful object that for the moment remains inactive.

THEMES

NATURE VS. CIVILIZATION

In "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," the speaker contemplates early-morning London from a bridge. In the clear, quiet dawn, the speaker's takes in the city and its natural surroundings, seeing them as both separate and unified. By comparing the city to the natural world that surrounds it, the poem emphasizes the challenge of locating a clear border between the two. The poem arguably goes so far as to suggest that there *isn't* one, and that the city itself is an extension of nature.

With its title, the poem opens with an image of a bridge—a symbol of the bond between the human and the natural world. A bridge is a human-made structure that spans a natural feature (in this case, the River Thames). It puts distance between people and the water yet also creates a space for people to appreciate the water from a new angle. In that sense, the bridge allows people to both overcome nature and immerse themselves in it more deeply. As an image, then, this bridge represents the link between these two worlds.

The poem's first lines then develop the connection between the city and nature by describing the city itself as a natural feature of the Earth. In fact, according to the speaker, the city is actually *better* looking than any other feature of "Earth," to the point that the sight of it is "touching." "Earth" is a word that more strongly connotes the planet's green and blue wilderness than the image of a city, yet in the speaker's description, the Earth seems proud to "show"—as in "show off"—early-morning London as if the city were its offspring.

The speaker also challenges perceived borders between nature and the city. The speaker lists some of the manmade structures he or she looks upon—"Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples," which at first might suggest a contrast between urban and natural scenery. Yet even as their variety is evidence of human beings' technical skill, it is also indebted to the various forms of nature: mountains, cliffs, canyons, trees, etc. These structures lie "Open unto the fields," as if to acknowledge their debt, "and to the sky," as if to locate both the city's aspirations and its limits. Furthermore, the city's openness suggests a fluid border—that there is no clear line where the city ends and nature begins. This is further exemplified when the speaker notes that the river glides *through* the city "at his own sweet will."

Finally, the poem judges this mix of city and nature as somehow even better than "pure" nature. In fact, the city seems the ideal stage for contemplating the "beauty of the morning," as the morning sunlight is somehow better appreciated when cast upon the waking city. "Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill," the speaker says. Rather than reveal the city's ugliness, the sunlight *enhances* its fairness. The cityscape seems to glitter with more majesty than "valley, rock, or hill" ever did. Like mountains, the buildings are also "silent" and "bare"—imagery that suggests the city itself as a place of peace and renewal.

It's worth noting that Wordsworth wrote this poem during the Industrial Revolution, meaning that the idyllic London his speaker describes was probably far from the reality of urban life at the time. In this sense, the poem can also be understood as a vision of what an ideal city *could* be, or perhaps simply an overly rosy vision spurred by the relative clarity of a morning not yet encumbered by the smoke of industry.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Line 5
- Lines 6-7
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 12

INDIVIDUALITY VS. COMMUNITY

In describing London, the poem's first-person speaker alludes to a range of human experience. The poem emphasizes a tension between the individual speaker and the city he or she observes, implicitly questioning how best to conceive of a city's identity: does a city actually *have* an identity, or is it just a bunch of disparate pieces in close proximity? By expressing opinions in the first person and personifying aspects of the city, the poem suggests it's possible to look at it both ways—specifically, that an *individual* perspective helps us see the city as a unified *whole*. The poem both acknowledges the city's size and diversity while asserting that it has a unique and cohesive identity *based on* its many disparate parts.

From the beginning, the poem emphasizes that its perspective is both limited and panoramic. The title precisely identifies time and place: "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802." Its specificity narrows the perspective to a single spot in a single moment in time. However, from this precise location, the speaker is positioned to take in a broad and inclusive view of the city.

The poem's first three lines further emphasize the tension between the individual and the city, or between the part and the whole. Because they make opinionated claims about the beauty of the city, the first two lines confirm that a single city-dweller (or city-visitor) is speaking. The third line, however, widens the scope. This poem isn't about particular street-level relationships, but rather about the broader, vaguer "majesty" of the city; though filtered through one person's perspective, this is a poem about the whole of London. And by speaking with such conviction, the speaker suggests that the sight of the city can be emotionally stirring for *any* viewer. The speaker, therefore, prepares to participate in the collective of the city's literal waking, an experience that's all the more "touching"—more majestic—when shared.

At the same time, the speaker sees the city for its resemblance to a single person who, "like a garment" wears the "beauty of the morning." In this way, the speaker conditions the reader to the contradiction of one (i.e. the city) equaling many (i.e. its many distinct inhabitants). The speaker also seems to be reminding the reader that the city would not exist if it weren't for living, breathing human beings. Though writing during a time of exploding industry, the speaker asserts that, more than any factory, *people* are what make up a city's identity.

The speaker concludes with a striking image that represents both the individual city-dweller and the city as a whole: "the very houses seem asleep; / And all that mighty heart is lying still!" The speaker notably moves from the plural "houses" to the singular "heart," a metaphor for the sleeping city. Again, this suggests that the city's many individual residents together form one identity. This heart is a giant life force, on the brink of setting over a million lives into motion. The "mightiness" of this solitary heart ends the poem on a note of strength: the unified identity of the city is what gives it, and all the individuals who live there, potential.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-5
- Line 13
- Line 14

FLEETING BEAUTY

The poem takes place at dawn, a moment of fleeting tranquility before the city wakes up and interrupts the speaker's calm. This sense of impermanence infuses every aspect of the poem. It repeatedly reminds the reader that the city represents change, in the sense that it has transformed the landscape and reordered human life. Thus, the poem argues that beauty and tranquility are impermanent—but it also insists that despite the change, beauty can always be recovered.

From its opening lines, the poem describes a version of the city that will not last. The city is "fair" and "touching in its majesty." In the morning sunlight, it is "silent" and "bare." The speaker does not say what will come next, but given what we know about London during the Industrial Revolution, we can safely assume that noise and roughness will replace the silence and fairness once people wake up and start going to work. Other pieces of the poem's context also imply the impermanence of the speaker's vision. Presumably the speaker is in transit, not just standing on the bridge, but walking across it. The day is specified too, emphasizing the momentary nature of the vision.

By omitting, or merely hinting at, the characteristic features of an industrial city, the poem emphasizes the impermanence of what the speaker sees. The speaker describes the spread of buildings as "All bright and glittering in the smokeless air." With

the words "bright" and "glittering," the speaker conveys a sense of total clarity. But this clarity only exists thanks to the absence of smoke in the air. The speaker implicitly reminds readers that the city will only look this way as long as the factories aren't churning.

Also unusual in a busy industrial city, the "river glideth" without anything blocking or diverting it. The river runs "at his own sweet will," that is, without human interference. This tranquil image contributes to the speaker's deep calm. Given the context of the poem, however, it's arguable that the speaker says this knowing that, given the factories and slaughterhouses that line its banks, the river is growing more polluted—and less naturally beautiful—every day.

The ecstatic language in the second half of the poem suggests that despite the constant change, an attentive observer can always find beauty in the city. The speaker describes the city as if seeing it for the first time. "Never" did the sun "steep" anything so beautifully in its light; "Ne'er" has the speaker felt a "calm so deep." From the earlier descriptions, it's clear the speaker understands this beauty's fleetingness. These ecstatic expressions of a fresh vision suggest that the fleetingness makes the beauty more emotionally moving, because it's so precious. The poem suggests that by embracing the stillness, silence, and clarity of mornings such as these, the city-dweller can learn to appreciate the briefly beautiful moments that only a city can offer.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 3
- Line 5
- Line 8
- Lines 9-11
- Line 12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:

The first line of models the rest of the poem, hinting at its main themes, giving information about the speaker, and previewing the way in which the poem will both adhere to and subvert the Italian sonnet form.

Read alongside the title, the first word, "Earth," introduces the theme of nature vs. civilization. The title indicates that the setting of the poem is Westminster Bridge, a manmade structure in an urban environment that spans a natural feature (the Thames River). Rather than start with the specific view from the bridge, however, the poem starts with a comprehensive view of the entire planet. Earth, which has the ability to "show," is personified. This attention to Earth tells the reader that the poem will consider the city's place within the natural world.

The line also gives the reader information about the speaker. There's a lot of confidence in the opening declaration. By professing certainty about the highly arguable claim that nothing is "more fair" than the view from the bridge, the speaker emphasizes that this is a poem told from the limited, and possibly unreliable, perspective of one person.

In its imperfect iambic pentameter, the line's meter imitates the way this person might actually talk. Not every foot in the line is unstressed-stressed, however, as it would be if it were written purely in iambic pentameter:

Earth has | not an | ything | to show | more fair:

The first foot is actually a trochee, a syllable pair that is stressed-unstressed—the reverse of an iamb. This trochee places extra emphasis on the word "Earth," and allows the speaker to begin on an assertive note with perhaps a hint of a challenge (that is, for someone to reveal anything fairer than the city before the speaker). The line also resembles the real speech of a city-dweller.

The line does end with an iamb, the stress of which highlights the word "fair," as well as with a colon, which creates an end-stopped line. This clear end-stop forces the reader to pause and consider the boldness of this opening statement, while the use of "fair" marks an instance of both adhering to and breaking with tradition: it was not uncommon in 1802 England to use "fair" to signify beauty, as Wordsworth does here. But to describe smelly, industrial London? That may have come as a surprise!

LINES 2-3

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:

Lines 2 and 3 further emphasize the speaker's subjectivity—that is, they present the speaker as an individual human, someone with a unique perspective and debatable opinions—by charging the speaker's claim with spiritual significance. The lines also introduce one of the poem's central questions about the urban setting.

If line 1 is a debatable opinion, line 2 is a harsh judgment. The person who could pass by the still unspecified "sight" must be "Dull...of soul," says the speaker. Whereas he or she appreciates the spiritually "touching" view of the city, the man on the street hardly notices it. Why? Because his soul lacks vitality. In expressing an opinion at all, however, the speaker places him- or herself among the city-dwellers, each one of them with opinions and prejudices of his or her own.

This line also contains internal rhyme—"Dull" with "soul"—which

is also an example of slant rhyme. The rhyme lends harshness to the judgment. And, in the line's irregular meter, the words are stressed, doubling the rhyme's emphasis.

The judgment isn't a cheap, personal attack, however. It may, instead, be an implicit critique of industrial urban life, one of hard labor and dulling routine. In an example of situational irony, the speaker suggests, the man on the street walks by the soothing view of the city without lifting his head precisely because life in that city is so soul-sucking. With the minor character of the passerby, the poem raises one of its central questions: how can a place full of so much ugliness and pain be so beautiful?

Line 3 prepares the reader for the revelation of that beauty. It indicates that the thing in question is a "sight," and adds to "fair" two more unexpected words: "touching" and "majesty." Like line 1, line 3 is end-stopped with a colon. This second end-stopped line establishes a pattern (most of the lines in the poem are end-stopped), and the colon in particular signals the grand reveal of the "sight," the view from the bridge.

LINES 4-5

This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning;

Coming after two rounds of colons, line 4 bursts onto the page. The speaker first notes the city's size and importance: it is not "the city," but "This City." As opposed to the more conceptual "the" or the more distant "that," the demonstrative pronoun "This" conveys the all-encompassing immediacy of the place (this sense of immediacy is further emphasized with the word "now"). The capitalization of "City" lends it importance and "majesty." Given the poem's title, readers can also assume that the "City" is London, the capital of England.

Line 4 also contains the poem's first instance of caesura, as commas separate "like a garment" from the rest of the line. The speaker is obviously enjoying the view. Whereas the unbroken lines of the opening rush impatiently and somewhat crankily toward the image, once the city actually appears in the sun, the speaker seems content to bask in its magnificence. The caesurae in lines 4 and 5 match the speaker's mood. They are not jerky, but rather contemplative.

The pleasure of contemplation gives the reader insight into the poem's main image (that is, the city itself). The city wears the "beauty of the morning," or the sunlight, "like a garment." This line establishes that it is indeed the morning, as well as a central theme that the preceding lines only hint at: the city is both an individual thing and a collection of individual things. The speaker emphasizes this contradiction by personifying the city, which appears to be wearing clothing, like a human being. Having been personified, the city joins Earth as a character in the poem. This moment also reflects the conflicting impulses of a speaker who wants to see things from the perspective of "Earth," yet also feels the need to criticize those who don't share his or her aesthetic preferences, like the man with the dull soul.

LINES 5-7

silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

Lines 5, 6, and 7 assign more unexpected characteristics to the city while varying the imagery. They also call attention to the poem's central theme of nature vs. civilization.

After the semicolon caesura in line 5, the words "silent" and "bare" appear. Before dipping down into line 6, however, it's not entirely clear what these words describe. They eventually modify the list of buildings, but at this point they could just as well modify "This City" or "The beauty of the morning" (from a less technical perspective, they *do* describe those things, since the buildings are part of the city and the morning's beauty). What is clear, however, is that the reader has seen these words before, but probably not in this context. Like "fair" and "touching," "silent" and "bare" are unexpected choices for describing a city, especially London in the thick of the Industrial Revolution. The speaker introduces a fresh vision of the typically smoggy city, but the poem contains an implicit warning: like the fleeting dawn, this urban beauty will not last.

Line 6 then presents a list of buildings. In the morning sunlight, the speaker sees "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples," a carefully selected variety. The ships might represent commerce, the towers government, the domes architectural skill, the theatres art, and the temples religion. These imply a rich variety of human activity, not to mention a dizzying number of humans. Though "silent" and "bare" at the moment, then, these buildings will soon erupt in a frenzy of noise and activity, very much awake.

These buildings, however, don't exist solely for their human occupants. They seem also to possess an inexpressible connection with the natural world, and as such "lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky." The buildings' openness suggests a fluidity between them and the fields, which, though they may be agricultural, are a gradual step toward "pure" nature. As for the sky, the buildings could either be reaching for it, or dissolving into it. The speaker does not say, choosing instead to offer that the city and nature may be one and the same (they are certainly both part of Earth).

In line 7, the punctuation and meter emphasize the fields and the sun, those seemingly infinite horizons:

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

Both words are stressed, causing the line to begin (indeed, to "open") with a trochee (two in a row, in fact), before falling back into the expected iambic rhythm. The caesura here also pushes the reader to linger over "fields," while the semicolon's end-stop

prompts a second look at "sky." This end-stopped line is also the first of three total end-stopped lines to use a semicolon. This signals that the speaker is not totally through with creating an image of the city, just taking a final breath before summing it up.

LINE 8

All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

Line 8 ends the octave, the first section in the Italian sonnet form, and thereby finishes presenting the problem of the poem. It also presents the first fill stop, definitively ending the poem's first sentence. And it reiterates, clarifies, and solidifies the poem's central image of the city.

With "All," this line refers to everything that came before it. The adjectives "bright" and "glittering," therefore, apply to the buildings, the fields, and everything else the sunlight touches. The line puts the finishing touch on an image that has been rather laboriously constructed. Unlike the caesura-riddled lines above it, this line flows unbroken, as if it were on display, the final product of a combination of rough images. The clear end-stop creates a note of finality, as if underscoring that the speaker's depiction of the city is true and the speaker will entertain no argument to the contrary.

Again, this line ends the octave. According to the conventions of the Italian sonnet, that means the "proposition," or problem, of the poem has by this point been fully presented. The speaker doesn't express a specific question or problem, but the buildup of contradictions suggests that the city *itself* is a problem. As such, the reader can expect the sestet (the next six lines) to comment on the contradictory nature of the city. In fact, the final detail, that the air is "smokeless," shows a way into the sestet: knowing smoke will soon fill the sky, the speaker will spend the final lines recording the impressions left by this moment of fleeting beauty.

LINES 9-10

Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;

Lines 9 and 10 respond to the image of the glittering city (presented in line 8) by echoing the earnestness of the first line and reaffirming the image laid down throughout the octave (the poem's first eight lines). Like the first line of the octave, this line, the first of the sestet (the final six lines of the poem), is argumentative. Even though it cries out confidently, its language deepens the contradictions contained in the previous lines.

"Never," the first word in line 9, returns to the argumentative stance of line 1: "Earth has not anything to show more fair" than London on a clear morning. In an Italian sonnet, the sestet is supposed to comment on the octave. In this case, the sestet is reviewing and reiterating what was said in the octave. It is bringing the argument about the supreme beauty of London at dawn to a new level.

In line 1 the city is "fair," beautiful in a soft and subtler way—an appropriate adjective for the pale light of dawn. In line 10, however, the sunlight is equated with "splendour." The city has left its fair garment behind, now lying fully exposed in a rich, magnificent light. During the octave, which takes place at dawn, the presence of the sun was only implied. In line 9, however, the word "sun" is used for the first time. The sun is fully risen and brilliant; the speaker cannot hold off from naming it any longer. The city can't avoid it either. To describe the sun's shining, the speaker chooses the word "steep," which means to soak. As if at the bottom of the ocean, every part of the city is steeped in the glorious sunlight.

Once again, lines 9 and 10 echo line 1 in their claim that the city is somehow more beautiful than nature. Neither "valley, rock, or hill," the speaker claims, has been steeped more beautifully in the sunlight than the city is at this very moment. Yet it may be the case that the speaker doesn't esteem the city over nature as a whole, but rather over its separate features. In line 10, caesuras emphasize the separateness of these features. Line 10 is only the second line in the poem to use full iambic pentameter—five unstressed-stressed syllable pairs:

In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;

The commas interrupt a steady rhythm and throw borders between the words referring to natural features. Furthermore, the conjunction linking the features is "or," implying an option among the items in the list. The speaker may be saying that, alone, a rock or a valley can't match the city. Considering the fluid border between the city and the fields in line 7, the speaker may believe that *together*, the natural features may perform differently. They may even combine with the buildings (whose list in line 6 resembles the list in line 10), fusing nature and the city in a way that somehow transcends "pure" nature.

Of course, in acknowledging a change in the quality of light, the speaker accepts the impermanence of his or her vision. Already, the "fair" dawn has passed, and soon the splendid steepage will too.

LINE 11

Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!

Line 11 emphasizes the point made in lines 9 and 10 with repetitive language. Similar to lines 2 and 3 in the octave, it credits the view of the city with a redeeming, soul-soothing quality. Line 11 is also noteworthy for being the first line to use a first-person pronoun ("I"). Though the preceding lines sound like they come from a first-person speaker, line 11 confirms it.

The line uses anaphora to reiterate the claim of lines 9 and 10. "Ne'er saw I, never felt," says the speaker ("Ne'er," by the way, is pronounced as one syllable). Anaphora helps underline the speaker's earnestness, but plays another role too. In line 11, each use of "never" is attached to a different verb—the first to

"saw," the second to "felt." Both verbs act upon (or rather don't act upon, since what's being described has "never" happened) the "calm so deep." The anaphora of "never," therefore, defines two different types of calm. The first is visual, a calm spread over the slumbering city, deep in that it extends to the limits of his or her vision. The second is internal, spreading deep into the speaker's soul.

Given that unprecedented calm, it comes as a bit of a surprise to see an exclamation mark, which indicates excitement, end the sentence (and end-stop the line). This is another contradiction. How can that which is so deeply calm be so excited? Given how quickly the light is changing, it may be the case that the moment of calm, like the "fair" dawn and the "smokeless air" before it, has already passed.

LINE 12

The river glideth at his own sweet will:

Whereas line 11 introduces the concept of calm, line 12 actually embodies it. In doing so, it allows the speaker to assess his or her surroundings and linger for one last moment on the pretty scene before launching into the poem's final lines.

Line 11 depicts the city and nature cooperating to the best of their abilities. The River Thames does not course, rush, run, flow, or speed; it "glideth" (an archaic version of "glide"). It moves at a peaceful, leisurely pace. Its easy movement is emphasized by the word itself. "Glideth," with its round *g*, liquid *l*, and almost sibilant *th*, imitates the easy nature of the river. The speaker also observes agency in the river. Not only does it glide, but it does so "at his own sweet will." In early-19th-century London, which saw the working class demanding more rights, the personified river appears almost like a citizen who, if not legally allowed to vote, is certainly capable of making his "own" judgments.

This idea of will, however, points to something more immediate. Like line 8 with its "smokeless air," line 12 describes a situation that cannot last. For the moment, the river appears to move "at his own sweet will," but the speaker likely knows that upstream and downstream the factories and slaughterhouses are probably already dirtying the waters, subjecting the river to *their* will.

In discussing individual will, the speaker may also be thinking of him- or herself. Since the title, this is the first time the poem returns to the bridge, or close to it, anyway. The river glides under and ahead of the speaker. In its soothing imagery, its liquid sounds ("river," "glideth," "will"), and unbroken line, the image of the river represents a peaceful breath that contrasts with the poem's explosive final lines.

LINES 13-14

Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Lines 13 and 14 revise the image of the sleeping city. They suggest that, as the sun gets higher and the city starts to wake, the speaker experiences a vision that is still beautiful, but also terrifying.

To mark the change in attitude, line 13 begins with an abrupt apostrophe: "Dear God!" These two stressed syllables, which form a spondee, jerk the reader from the daydream of the sweetly gliding river:

Dear God!

Though the poem has hinted at religious themes with words like "soul" and "temple," line 13 contains the first explicit reference to Christianity. As a direct appeal to God, the apostrophe rings out with extra clarity. The outburst seems spontaneous, as if the glare of the sun has grown so powerful that the speaker can't help but yell. In the preceding lines the speaker has expressed many contradictions and has implicitly raised many questions. Unable to answer these questions, he or she appeals to God.

The remainder of the line reiterates one of the images laid down in the octave: the sleeping city. In the octave, the speaker describes the city as a single being, but in line 13, the sleeping units multiply. Note the plural: "the very houses seem asleep." It seems that, for the speaker, imagining a single being is far easier, and more pleasant, than imagining many. This is why the apostrophe includes a note of terror or at least a clear disruption of the speaker's previous calm. The amount of people sleeping in those houses surpasses the imaginative capacity of a single person. This is perhaps why, in the final line, the speaker attempts to unify the city once again.

Line 14 combines every previous image of the city into the image of a "mighty heart." In the same way that line 13 revises its counterpart in the octave, line 14 revises line 8. The key word between lines 8 and 14 is "all." In line 8, "All" is "bright and glittering." In line 14, "all" contributes to the formation of "that mighty heart." Unlike the city at dawn, the heart is not clothed. It is terrifying for its rawness, yet beautiful for its life force, not to mention what it represents—love, life, health. And though the speaker doesn't flinch, he or she backs away from the heart. Whereas the speaker refers to the city in line 4 as "This," he or she refers to the heart with the more distant "that." No longer able to fully imagine the city, the speaker hesitates to embrace it.

In this way, the speaker loses control, but another ordering power takes over—the poem's meter.

And all that mighty heart is lying still!

This is the only line in the poem that's purely iambic and uninterrupted by caesura. Like a heart, the line steadily beats. Except that, of course, this heart doesn't beat, at least not yet.

Ironically, at the moment the speaker observes it, the "heart is lying still," despite the iambic pentameter. This line, with its contradictory heart, asks a final question: does the city represent life or death? In doing so, it reminds the reader of the many other difficult and probably unanswerable questions it has raised.

SYMBOLS

MORNING

The poem repeatedly calls attention to the fact that it's morning to depict a waking city that, though quiet and beautiful at dawn, will quickly recede into the smoke and noise of industry. The fleeting dawn represents impermanent beauty, and as the poem develops the speaker gains a greater appreciation for that impermanence.

Line 5 is the first to actually state that it's morning, but once the reader knows this, the preceding lines take on a different color. If it's morning, that means the speaker, who is standing on Westminster Bridge, is watching the sun rise over London, a moment that will not last. In the first description of morning, the city wears the sunlight "like a garment." In that sunlight, all the buildings are "silent" and "bare." There is silence and pureness to the first moments of the morning, just as there might be in the sliver of a moment before a human wakes up.

In line 8, the city is summed up as "bright and glittering in the smokeless air." The buildings appear this way because of the morning sunlight, but that sunlight, the line implies, will soon be blocked by smoke. Later, in line 9, the morning sunlight grows more intense. The brief dawn has passed, and the sun "steep[s]" the city in a rich light, as if filling it with the energy it needs to start the day. There is "splendour" in this moment, says the speaker, but soon, thanks to the human activity it powers, that splendor will subside.

Finally, in lines 13 and 14, the poem returns to the image of waking: the "houses seem asleep" and the "heart is lying still." But the city is not, in fact, asleep—or if it is, it won't be for long. The poem's exclamatory end reminds readers that this state of inactivity, like the morning, will soon end, bringing with it a total transformation of the city and the individual's experience of it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning;"
- **Line 8:** "All bright and glittering in the smokeless air."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Dear God! the very houses seem asleep; / And all that mighty heart is lying still!"

POETIC DEVICES

HYPERBOLE

The poem uses hyperbolic language in three places: lines 1, 9, and 11. In these lines, the speaker declares that London at dawn is the *most* beautiful, tranquil sight on Earth. What's notable about this hyperbole is that the speaker uses it sincerely—overwhelmed by the moment, he or she truly believes that the sight is the most beautiful on Earth. While the lines sound hyperbolic to the reader, they may not sound that way to the speaker.

Even so, the first line of the poem is an opinion stated as fact, a clear sign of hyperbolic language. In it, the speaker claims that of all that the planet contains, both natural and human made, nothing is "more fair" than this vision of London at dawn. The line's careful word choice emphasizes the hyperbole. By opening with the all-encompassing "Earth," the speaker applies judgment to one of the largest fields possible, increasing the likelihood of the claim being hyperbolic.

When the speaker makes the claim, he or she uses "not any thing" rather than "nothing." While this serves the technical purpose of giving the line an extra syllable so that it conforms to the 10-syllable pentameter (though it's not purely iambic), it also stretches the claim's key language. "In case there's any doubt," the speaker seems to be saying, "I'm going to enunciate my point clearly." Given that the poem doesn't speak merely for England or Europe, but the entire world, the reader might be justified in wondering on what authority the speaker makes this claim, but given the description that follows, it seems more sincere than self-conscious.

In lines 9 and 11, the speaker returns with hyperbolic language to describe the visual and emotional effects of the interaction between the sun and the city's buildings. As in line 1, these lines use negative language (in line 1, "not any thing," and here, repetition of "never") to get across a simple point: the moment is incomparably beautiful. Line 9 reads almost as a repetition of line 1, except the sun takes the place of the Earth. The Earth has nothing more fair to show off, and the sun, at this moment, is at the top of "his" game in warmly illuminating the city. Here, the sun and Earth are teammates in a cosmic system, funneling all their powers of demonstration and illumination into the view of London from the River Thames.

If that sounds far-fetched, it's because it is—it's hyperbolic. But line 11, while it deepens the hyperbole, provides an answer to the question raised in line 1, namely, on what authority does the speaker make his or her claim? In a poem told entirely from a single perspective, line 11 contains the first use of "I," reminding the reader that as absolute as these claims may seem, they represent just one person's view of the world.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Earth has not any thing to show more fair:"
- **Lines 9-11:** "Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill; / Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies both manmade and natural features of the view from Westminster Bridge. This personification challenges the notion that nature and the city cannot harmoniously coexist. As the sun rises over, and the river flows through, 19th-century London, the speaker observes not characters in competition, but a cooperative, integrated process of waking.

In line 1, the poem personifies the Earth, which doesn't have "any thing to show more fair." As far as we know, the Earth does not "show" anything; it simply *is*. The act of showing off an attribute is something only a self-conscious human can do. This line suggests that the planet is proud of the city. This tells readers something about what the speaker is feeling. The speaker may be proud of what humans have managed to create, and may also see him/herself as a privileged observer whom the personified Earth has chosen to reveal itself to. Like the Earth (and later, the city, sun, river, and houses), the speaker is a character in the waking process.

In lines 4 and 5, the city is described as wearing the morning sunlight like a "garment." As with the act of showing off an attribute, wearing a piece of clothing is distinctly human. As a choice of how to present oneself, it implies self-consciousness. Furthermore, a garment is, by definition, manmade. It's implied that the humans in the houses are waking, and that the city's buildings will soon be filled with and surrounded by them. The city, first described as a slowly waking human, will mimic that activity. This permits the reader to interpret the city as a character throughout the rest of the poem, one that interacts with the personified features to come.

Line 10 personifies the sun by using a possessive masculine pronoun. The "first splendour" is "his," i.e. it belongs to the sun. By giving the sun possession over the beauty of its light, the speaker presents that light as a tool, something to be wielded according to a conscious, distinctly human choice. Here, the sun joins the Earth and the city as a character in the poem. From the center of the solar system, he recognizes the beauty in the urban landscape that his subordinate, the Earth, has to offer, and chooses to throw it under the spotlight.

Another piece of this cosmic interaction, the River Thames, is personified in line 12. Like the sun, the river is given possession over one of its attributes: "at his own sweet will," the river glides under the bridge and out to sea. Remember that in line 1, the Earth interacts with the speaker, who is just as much a character in the poem as the personified natural and urban features are. The image of a river with an unencumbered "will" implies the presence of the speaker, a representative of humankind, whose industrial activity was then in the process of obstructing and dirtying the river water. The speaker suggests that at this moment, with Earth as a home and the sun as energy, the natural river and the crowded city can operate side-by-side, in harmony.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Earth has not any thing to show more fair:"
- **Lines 4-5:** "This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning;"
- **Lines 5-6:** "silent, bare, / Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendour,"
- **Line 12:** "The river glideth at his own sweet will:"
- **Line 13:** "the very houses seem asleep;"

PARADOX

In lines 4 and 5, the poem depicts the city with seemingly contradictory language, an instance of paradox. The city wears the morning sunlight "like a garment," or piece of clothing. At the same time, however, the city (more specifically, its buildings) is "bare." How is it possible that the city is both bare (i.e. naked) and clothed? This paradox isolates "bare," the word at the center of the contradiction, and thus asks the reader to meditate on its layered meaning.

At first glance, the language doesn't quite make sense. Though the image of the clothed city is metaphorical, and therefore more flexible in its presentation, the reader might justifiably expect consistency out of Wordsworth. But the speaker is not naively negating the image of the previous clause. As an adjective, "bare" may not simply mean "naked." It may also mean fresh, uncorrupted, clean, or full of potential (kind of like a blank canvas).

Though in this poem it's clearly an adjective, the reader might also consider the verb form of "bare," which means to reveal, uncover, or expose. While at first that reading may not square with the clothed city, there are interpretations that allow for it. For example, given that the sunrise is an observable process, the speaker may be watching the clothed city slowly reveal itself, in the same way that a woken sleeper strips sheets from their body. And the poem's final line reinforces that meaning. The poem embodies a continuous revelation that ends with the core of the sleeping body: a massive heart, fully bared.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "This City now doth, like a garment, wear /

> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,"

ANAPHORA

In lines 9 and 11, the poem uses anaphora to emphasize the unprecedented freshness of this particular morning, and to establish a connection between nature and the human soul. The speaker uses the word "Never" to compare the morning vision to every sunrise that came before it. This "Never" also echoes the hyperbole of line 1, which similarly uses negative language ("not any") to emphasize the novelty of this precise moment at dawn, on Westminster Bridge.

Then, in line 11, the speaker repeats the highly exclusive adverb twice (in two forms, "Ne'er" and "never"). The speaker is overcome with intense emotion—he or she believes the vision to be incomparably splendid and soothing. Line 11 also complicates the description of a fresh vision by applying the adverb to the action of a different subject. In line 9 the subject of the "never" as the sun; in line 11, it's the speaker ("Ne'er saw I"). So, across lines, the word "never" offers two experiences on freshness—one solar, the other human. Within line 11, the word deepens that human experience further. "Ne'er" applies to what the speaker *sees*, while "never" applies to what the speaker feels. The "calm so deep," therefore, is both spread *across* the city and *within* the speaker. It allows the speaker to more deeply identify with self and place.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Never"
- **Line 11:** "Ne'er," "never"

END-STOPPED LINE

About half of the poem's lines are end-stopped. The halting punctuation gives the poem an appearance and sound of measured, step-by-step development, calling attention to the artificial—or manmade—nature of the poem, especially given that it represents a vision of fleeting beauty. The end-stopped lines in this poem can be roughly broken into three categories: those that end with a colon, a semicolon, and a period or exclamation mark. Each punctuation type affects the poem's pace in a different way.

Lines 2, 3, and 12 are end-stopped with a colon. In all three cases, the colon seems to accelerates the poem, or to create a moment of tension—like a gate between a champing racehorse and the open track. In line 3, the colon concludes its buildup. As if standing on a precipice, the reader is given the view that the speaker has been waiting to describe. The halting first three lines give way to a flexible description that, though punctuated by caesuras and the softer end-stop of a comma in line 5, flows relatively unbroken until line 7.

The colon that ends line 12 works similarly, in that it divides an observation from the outburst it provokes. The image of the calmly flowing river is abruptly transformed into a heavenly appeal: "Dear God!" The lines are separate to emphasize the change from calm to ecstatic, and the colon, which implies a direct relationship between two parts of a sentence, shows the reader in just how little space that transformation can take place.

Semicolons, which end-stop lines 7, 10, and 13, have an almost opposite effect. They slow the poem down by changing the subject or adding a new dimension to an image. The semicolon at the end of line 7, for example, completes the first description of the city, but because it's not a period, it signals that the description may continue. It's a breath-like pause that solidifies the first unit of thought before proceeding to the next, which starts fresh on its own line.

The semicolon that ends line 13 works similarly. It divides one view of the city from a deeper, altered view. The semicolon in line 10 works a bit differently, however. Here, the semicolon cooperates with the anaphora of "never." The end-stopped line allows "Ne'er" to start its own line, which, in turn, emphasizes the anaphora. It also distinguishes the two parts of the anaphora, which apply "never" in slightly different ways, without dividing them the stark way a period would.

Periods and exclamation mark end-stopped lines 8 and 11, and in this way help the poem fit the form it follows, that of the Italian sonnet. In a traditional Italian sonnet, the 14-line poem is broken in an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The octave is supposed to present an argument or premise, and the sestet is supposed to respond to that premise. That's more or less what's happening in this poem: the octave presents a view of the city, and the sestet reiterates and revises that view. So, at the end of line 8, the period reminds the reader that part one has ended.

Also typical of the Italian sonnet is that the sestet enacts a "turn," or change in perspective. The sestet as a whole enacts that change, but it also contains many changes itself, nearly all of which are marked by an end-stopped line. For example, the exclamation mark that ends line 11 resoundingly concludes the speaker's bold claim, and prepares us for the next line's shift in focus.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "fair:"
- **Line 3:** "majesty:"
- **Line 5:** "bare,"
- **Line 7:** "sky;"
- **Line 8:** "air."
- **Line 10:** "hill;"
- **Line 11:** "deep!"
- **Line 12:** "will:"
- **Line 13:** "asleep;"

- **Line 14:** "still!"

METAPHOR

Much of the language in this poem is metaphorical, but its most striking, standalone metaphor is that of the "mighty heart" in the final line. The poem personifies the city elsewhere—for example, in the image of the city wearing the sunlight "like a garment"—and in that way prepares the reader for this heart image. But the heart represents an entirely new vision. It is rawer and more consuming than the images that come before it, and therefore deserves special attention.

The "still" and "mighty heart" is an appropriate end to the poem, because it embodies many of the physical and emotional tensions that the poem is so concerned with. For example, the speaker sees beauty in the industrial sprawl of the city. Like the city, the heart can be both ugly and beautiful. It is beautiful in the sense that it symbolizes love and makes human life possible. At the same time, however, the speaker might cower at the sight of the giant, raw organ. The speaker's reaction to it—"Dear God!"—implies both beauty and terror.

The heart metaphor also reminds the reader of the tension between the individual and the group. Is the city a single organism, or a collection of distinct organisms? The speaker doesn't answer the question directly, but by presenting the city at the end of the poem as the life force of a single human being, the speaker signals an opinion: the city is both. All the people who live in the city together make up a single, beating heart; at the same time, the city is itself a source of vibrancy, a heart that pumps life into its surroundings.

The heart also returns the poem to its beginning, to the speaker, whose heart beats unacknowledged as the poem develops. The "mighty heart" could be the speaker's way of reminding him or herself that he or she is just one body among many.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "that mighty heart"

SIBILANCE

Almost every line in the poem contributes to a subtle sibilance. The sibilance serves two purposes: it emphasizes key words, and gives the poem the quality of a whisper, appropriate for the quiet, early-morning setting.

Lines 2 and 3, for example, contain a cluster of /s/ sounds. Line two has "soul" and "pass." Line 3 has "sight," "its," and "majesty." The softness of breath streaming slowly from the teeth infuses the poem with the deep calm of the speaker. The soft /j/ sound adds to this tranquility. A large number of words in close proximity start with or contain /s/ sounds, and it's no accident that many of them play an important role thematically. For example, "silent" in line 5 represents the unexpectedly peaceful descriptions of the city. In line 8, "smokeless" implies factory smoke. And in line 14, "still," the last word of the poem, acts somewhat like "silent," but has a different effect on the reader, who knows that the city is about to burst to life.

Perhaps the most striking moment of sibilance occurs in line 13, with "houses seem asleep." Here the hushed quality of the /s/ sounds reflects the content of the phrase; it's as if the speaker is whispering so as not to disturb these sleeping houses.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "ss"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "C"
- **Line 5:** "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "ss"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "s"

CAESURA

Half the lines in this poem are broken by one or more caesura. In most cases, the caesura slows down the poem to focus on a specific image, but in a couple it's used to emphasize a feeling.

Caesura first occurs in line 4, in which commas separate the phrase "like a garment." (In the next line, readers learn that this phrase is being used to modify the "beauty of the morning.") This caesura thus contains a phrase that gives more life to the image of the city. It asks the reader to pause to consider the separated phrase, which turns out to be thematically important since it personifies the city. The caesura in line 5 also slows the poem. Furthermore, it allows the reader to attach "silent" and "bare" to multiple phrases. Though the reader soon learns that these words describe the specific buildings, without knowledge of what follows, the adjectives could just as well modify "This City" or "The beauty of the morning." Thus, this caesura helps emphasize the simultaneous unity and individuality of the city and its parts.

In lines 11 and 13, caesura adds force and significance to a feeling. Line 11 is dedicated to the speaker's deep calm. Before arriving at that calm, however, caesura marks the depth of the feeling that *leads* to it—the feeling is both physical, affecting visual perception ("saw"), and interior ("felt"). The caesura in line 13 also emphasizes emotion. This time, it's the apostrophe to God, which embodies the sharply shifting emotions of a speaker who is suddenly overcome with the sight of the city.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** ",," ","
- **Line 5:** ";," ","
- **Line 6:** "," "," "," ","
- **Line 7:** ","
- **Line 10:** "," "," ","
- **Line 11:** "," ","
- **Line 13:** "!"

APOSTROPHE

The exclamation that begins line 13—"Dear God!"—is an example of apostrophe. The direct appeal to a higher power mostly functions to emphasize the poem's formal "turn," through which the speaker arrives at a new understanding of the subject matter.

The appeal to God affects the poem in a few different ways. First, it abruptly ends the contented, almost blissful description of the smoothly gliding river, signaling the shift in perspective. The apostrophe's monosyllabic and exclamatory urgency further suggests that this shift is a big one. Is the speaker terrified? Awestruck? Too impressed for words? In this way, the apostrophe prepares the reader for the grotesque final image of the heart, far from the "bright and glittering" city.

The apostrophe isn't just a throwaway exclamation. The speaker has a good reason for appealing to what we can assume is the highest power the speaker believes in. The speaker has no choice. The final view of the city is just *that* intense. Finally, by bringing God into the picture, the speaker adds the heavenly realm into a poem that represents a cross-section of other realms: the earthly realm, the solar system; the urban and the natural. It's a final flourish that deepens the sonnet just as space is running out.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "Dear God!"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains a few important moments of enjambment, which cleverly mimic the content of the lines in which they appear. For example, line 2 flows directly into line 3, practically *daring* the reader to "pass by" the white space between the two lines—even as these lines assert the importance of pausing to appreciate the fleeting beauty of the moment! This enjambment essentially reflects how dangerously easy it is to forget to stop and smell the roses.

Later, the enjambment of line 4 causes it to spill over into the following line—to essentially "wear" line 5 just as the city "wear[s] the beauty of the morning." Line 6 is also enjambed, reflecting the openness between the human constructions (the ships, theaters, etc.) and the fields and sky mentioned in line 7. The enjambment here erases any pause—any border or boundary—between the human and the natural world, and thus reflects the poem's broader thematic argument that the city itself is a part of, or at least is perfectly able to coexist with, nature. Finally, the enjambment between lines 9 and 10 echoes the "steeping" of the sun—that is, the way the sun bathes everything beneath it in a splendid glow. Line 9 overflows onto line 10, just as the "sun" spills down over the Earth.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "by / A"
- **Lines 4-5:** "wear / The"
- **Lines 6-7:** "lie / Open"
- **Lines 9-10:** "steep / In"

VOCABULARY

Fair (Line 1) - "Fair" is an adjective whose primary meaning here is "beautiful." It can also be taken to mean "light," in reference to the sunlight at dawn, and "pleasant," which applies to the clear, cloudless weather.

Touching (Line 3) - "Touching" is an adjective that means emotionally stirring. It's often used to describe the effect a human action or appearance has on another human, but in this poem, it describes the effect of the *city*. In that sense, it's an early, subtle step in personifying the city. Evoking physical touch, the word also emphasizes the connection between the speaker and his or her environment.

Doth (Line 4) - "Doth" is the archaic version of "does." In its use here, it means the city "does wear" the morning sunlight "like a garment." Or, even simpler, the city "wears" the morning sunlight.

Bare (Line 5) - "Bare" can mean naked, uncovered, or simple. In the poem, those are its primary meanings, referring to the appearance of the buildings in the morning sunlight—they are bare in the sense that they appear unmarked by human influence. However, the verb form is worth noting as well. As a verb, "bare" means "to reveal" or "uncover." Though the word in the poem only works as an adjective, this secondary meaning helps describe the process of coming into the light that the speaker is observing.

Glittering (Line 8) - "Glittering" means sparkling or shimmering. By implication, a glittering object has a reflective surface, and glitters because it's reflecting light. In this poem, the reflective buildings are glittering in the sunlight. Glittering doesn't merely mean "shining," which is a steadier form of reflection. Like something that sparkles, a glittering object reflects light dynamically.

Smokeless (Line 8) - "Smokeless" means "without smoke." The poem uses it to convey that the sky is clear and unpolluted. But

by describing a smokeless sky, the poem implies the factories and fireplaces that will soon make it smoky. Smoke can also be defined metaphorically, as "interference"—when the sky is smokeless, the speaker sees the city as it actually is.

Steep (Line 9) - As a verb, "steep" means to soak or bathe. In the poem, the sun steeps the city in its light. Similarly, the city is steeped in, or surrounded and influenced by, the qualities of morning. Another definition is "precipitous," as in a steep or precipitous cliff. That's clearly not the use here, but it does help emphasize the natural features—"valley," "rock," and "hill"—that come in the next line.

Splendour (Line 10) - The adjective "splendour" (in American English, "splendor") means shining magnificence. Its root, the Latin verb "splendere," means "to shine." Its use in the poem, therefore, is appropriate, as it describes the morning sunlight. The word also connotes royalty, or even divinity. Read with that in mind, the poem describes the sun coming down to share its heavenly opulence with the manmade city.

Glideth (Line 12) - "Glideth" is the archaic version of "glides." "Glide" means to move smoothly. Here, the line can be read as saying "the river glides," though it's important to note that "glideth," because it has an extra syllable, helps the poem conform to iambic pentameter, which has ten syllables per line (though in this poem, not every line is perfectly iambic).

Mighty heart (Line 14) - The concluding image of the "mighty heart" refers to a version of the blood-pumping organ that is huge and powerful. The nature of the heart's power isn't entirely clear—a mighty ruler, for example, could be benevolent, but they could also be cruel. What is clear is that the heart is extremely strong and influential.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is an Italian sonnet (also known as a Petrarchan sonnet), a 14-line poem broken into an octave (eight lines, or two quatrains) and a sestet (six lines, or two tercets). In a traditional Italian sonnet, the octave is supposed to present the "proposition," or a sort of problem. In the sestet, with what's known as the "turn," the poem is supposed to address or resolve that problem.

This poem doesn't exactly follow that structure—arguably, the view of the city described in the octave isn't a problem, and the sestet doesn't go about solving it. But if we apply the definition of the Italian sonnet more loosely, the poem does follow its form. The octave presents an image of the city, and the sestet describes the emotional effect of that view on the speaker.

Furthermore, the image undergoes a transformation in the sestet. Here, there's another slight deviation from the Italian sonnet. Traditionally, the turn is supposed to start with the sestet. Though line 9 does enact a turn by beginning to comment on the image from the octave, there's an even sharper turn closer to the end of the poem. In the last two lines, the speaker cries out to God and sees the city as a massive heart. In this way, Wordsworth integrates a touch of the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet, whose turn occurs in the concluding couplet.

METER

Most sonnets written in English follow iambic pentameter, but the lines are pretty irregular. In all his poetry, Wordsworth aimed to represent common speech, the type he might have heard in London in 1802. The poem's more flexible meter lends authenticity to the speaker's description of the city, and spontaneity to the speaker's reactions to it. The stresses of the lines also often serve to emphasize specific words and reflect the speaker's strong emotions.

Starting with line 1, it's clear that the poem has broken with strict metrical convention:

Earth has | not a- | ny thing | to show | more fair:

Rather than begin with the unstressed-stressed syllable pair of the iamb, the poem starts with its reverse, the trochee, a stressed-unstressed foot that has a bold quality. The speaker begins the poem on an assertive note that reflects the speaker's conviction in the city's "fairness." As the first word and a stressed syllable, "Earth" is emphasized, signaling that the poem will deal just as much with nature as the city. Trochees repeat in the first feet of lines 9 and 11 as well, adding forcefulness—a sort of oomph—to the word "never."

In line 6, Wordsworth makes use of stressed syllables in a different way, to clarify the poem's images:

Ships, tow- | ers, domes, | theatres, |and tem- | ples lie

Here, all the one-syllable buildings are stressed, and all the two-syllable buildings are trochees, which again, give the words a sort of heaving, emphatic quality, as if the buildings are rising firmly from the ground.

In line 4 and line 13, the opening spondees (stressed-stressed) reflect the intense emotion as the speaker beholds the city and later calls out to God:

This City

And:

Dear God!

Importantly, at the end of the poem—and the end of the speaker's emotional development—the rhythm falls into pure

iambic pentameter:

And all | that migh- | ty heart | is ly- | ing still!

The speaker describes the city in many different ways in the poem, as if searching for the proper image. The search gives the poem a meandering and sometimes spontaneous quality that finally arrives at the "mighty heart." With the exclamation mark, this conclusion is resounding and confident, and those qualities are reinforced by the steady beat of iambic pentameter (even if the heart, "lying still," does not beat).

RHYME SCHEME

The typical rhyme scheme for an Italian sonnet is ABBAABBA for the octave and either CDECDE or CDCDCD for the sestet, and this poem follows that faithfully (it goes with the latter of the sestet options):

ABBAABBA CDCDCD

The only spot where it diverges is in line 3, where the poem has a slant rhyme. "Majesty" doesn't rhyme exactly with "by," "lie," or "sky." This could draw attention to outlying words, but it's probably more likely to go unnoticed. Since the slant rhyme occurs in line 3, the reader can't yet be certain that the poem is supposed to rhyme at all.

In fact, despite the obvious rhyme scheme, it's easy to read the entire poem without paying too much attention to rhyme. Thanks to a few cases of enjambment, some of the rhymes blend seamlessly into the next line (for example, between "lie" in line 7 and "Open" in line 8, the emphasis is on "Open," softening its rhyme with "sky").

There are also a few cases of internal rhyme in the poem. In line 2, "Dull" is a slant rhyme with "soul," as is "more" in line 9 with "splendour" in line 10. But these rhymes are subtle, and perhaps meant to go unnoticed. Wordsworth was heavily concerned with representing authentic human speech in his poetry. Writing about a city, a huge container of human life, that concern may have been exaggerated. It's no surprise that in rhyming his lines he opted for the subtle over the obvious.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Westminster Bridge" has no name, gender, or identifying features. Given biographical information, one could argue that the speaker is Wordsworth, but the poem *itself* contains none of that information.

What is clear is that the speaker is a person who is surprised, delighted, conflicted about, and in awe of the view of the city. The view is powerful enough to give the speaker what at first sounds like absolute confidence: "Earth has not anything to show more fair." And later: "Never did the sun more beautifully steep." But the poem's careful descriptions reveal that the speaker is at least on some level conscious of the contradictions in the pretty view. The buildings are "bright and glittering," but only because the air is "smokeless." In the final image, the speaker sees the whole city—a collection of over a million people—as a single heart. By developing toward the "mighty heart" lying in wait, the most striking and ambiguous image of the poem, the speaker comes across as aware of the fleeting nature of the city's tranquility.

SETTING

As its title spells out, the setting for the poem is Westminster Bridge, which spans the River Thames in London, on September 3, 1802. Westminster Bridge is now, and was then, in a notable location in London. In 1802, its west bank was home to the British Houses of Parliament, and Westminster Abbey stands a bit more to the west.

The year 1802 is important for two reasons. One, it tells readers that the poem was written about London during the Industrial Revolution, a period of major growth and change for the city. Two, it means that the French Revolution was still fresh in the memory of Europe. Though distraught over its devolution into Reign of Terror, Wordsworth was deeply influenced by democratic principles espoused by the French revolutionaries. Even though the poem itself makes no mention of any of this context, it helps readers understand the poem's efforts to see a sort of democratic beauty in the sprawling urban landscape.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Though he presumably wrote it in 1802, Wordsworth published "Westminster Bridge" in a collection titled *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807. The collection contains some of Wordsworth's best known poems, such as "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," in which the speaker indulges in an activity typical of Wordsworth: using the "inward eye" to reflect on a moment of previous tranquility in nature. "Westminster Bridge" is one of a cluster of sonnets that focus on humanity's impact on the world, but it differs from the others in its apparent optimism. In "London, 1802," for example, England is described as a place of "stagnant waters" and "selfish men." In "The World Is Too Much With Us," Wordsworth condemns the state of the English people, saying "We have given our hearts away." William Blake's "London," written around the same time, is also decidedly darker in its depiction of the city than is this poem. Though "Westminster Bridge" acknowledges human beings' violent impact, especially evident in cities, it also encourages its readers to revise their view of the dirty, smelly, smoky, and all-around bad industrial city.

Wordsworth was a leader among England's Romantic poets, solidifying a tradition that started with William Blake in the late 18th century and was expanded upon by poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats toward the middle of the 19th century. Like his peers, Wordsworth questioned much of the established political and literary thinking of the time, especially between the 1790s and the early 1800s. His visits to France in the years following the French Revolution stoked in him a kind of democratic fervor that he would try to incorporate into his poetry. In his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, a long introduction to the 1800 version of a book that featured both his poems and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), he insisted that poetry "arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings" uses "a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language." In this essay, he also famously asserted that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity."

His goal to use the language of common people in his poetry was similar to that of one of his major influences, the 17th-century English poet John Milton. Wordsworth's sonnet "London, 1802," starts with an apostrophe to Milton, and begs the author of *Paradise Lost* to "raise us up, return to us again; / And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power." Wordsworth's plans to revitalize English poetry were not entirely revolutionary in nature, drawing in part on a conservative attachment to the past.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1802, Europe was undergoing the First Industrial Revolution. As machine manufacturing replaced the agrarian economy, cities like London grew, and people started making a much more noticeable impact on nature. The technological change also resulted in societal upheaval. In 1811, for example, a group of English textile workers known as the Luddites rebelled against their employers, destroying the machines that had begun to replace them.

Also at this time, the French Revolution was a recent memory. Wordsworth was highly sympathetic to the French democratic causes, though disgusted by the ensuing Reign of Terror. While living in France in the early 1790s, Wordsworth met and fell in love with Annette Vallon, and in 1792 she gave birth to their daughter Caroline. According to the journals of Wordsworth's sister Dorothy (who was also a poet), "Westminster Bridge" was conceived on the morning of her departure with her brother to Calais, France. The purpose of the trip was to visit Caroline, whom Wordsworth had never met, and inform Annette of Wordsworth's plans to marry his childhood friend Mary Hutchinson. Wordsworth put down a record of this visit, too. In the sonnet "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free," he describes walking on the beach with Caroline, at sunset.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Ian McKellen Reads "Westminster Bridge" — Watch the British actor, of Lord of the Rings fame, read the poem in his own dramatic interpretation. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2IP9AXWHB8)
- Poetry Pairing — Read "Westminster Bridge" alongside a more recent travel article about London. (https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/18/poetry-pairing-composed-upon-westminster-bridge-september-3-1802/)
- William Wordsworth's Biography — A medium-length biography of William Wordsworth, including information about his upbringing, political beliefs, poetic theories, and contemporary poets. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- William Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads — A long essay in which Wordsworth articulates his theory about what poetry should be, and explains how he goes about making it. (https://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The World Is Too Much With Us

HOW TO CITE

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