

The Truest Romantic: How Wordsworth Found Beauty in Industrialized London

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In 1807 William Wordsworth published a collected work of poems in the lyrical ballad genre exploring ideas of romantic optimism and other ideals. One of these poems published was titled “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”. Much like the romantic works published at this time, it illustrated beauty in an optimistic light and a more personal first-person viewpoint. However, unlike most romantic published works, its focus is not on nature or the separation of man from society, it’s focus is on a more typically viewed villain of realists; the industrialized city of London. Many realist writers at this time focused on the horrible lives the common people had in the city of London. They attacked the industrial grime and apathy towards the working class. Wordsworth decided to write a piece where he was outside of it all looking in. By fully viewing the city in the context of its surroundings, nature, and the unusual circumstance of early morning when most are asleep, Wordsworth has a more objective and separated viewpoint. On an early morning in September, Wordsworth personifies the city of London with romantic ideals to illustrate the beauty and potential it contains which challenged his realist contemporaries who focused on a negative view of urban areas like London.

Wordsworth illustrates visions of beauty in the context of London when it is typically viewed as ugly to present a statement that optimism can transform a landscape and it is inarguably good. He writes how the buildings of London are “All bright and glittering in the smokeless air”. The use of the words “bright and glittering” is a direct compliment to this urban area. However, the inclusion of “smokeless air” shows a hopeful optimism of what London could be. By complimenting the good parts of London, he’s showing that beauty can be found in what is viewed as an ugly or evil place such as London. He doesn’t do this thoughtlessly, however. By including the condition of “smokeless” he’s commenting on its potential, not actuality. He doesn’t argue that London can be ugly, he’s just providing an example of how London can be beautiful given the right circumstances. Overall, he’s putting a romantic optimistic spin on what is more pessimistically seen as bad.

Another example of beauty in his view is “Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill ... The river glideth at his own sweet will.” He paints this picture of sunlight filling this space with “splendor” and the river flowing with this ideal of freedom. Beauty is unarguable with these descriptions. Again, he is providing examples of how London has true potential to contain beauty with its natural circumstances. London contains beauty with the conditions of a free river and a sun shining on the valley, on the rocks, and on hills; all-natural aspects of the terrain London finds itself in. By illustrating these conditional views of beauty, he is challenging the realistic pessimism that writes off all potential of London becoming better.

Wordsworth calls on his realist contemporaries to open their minds to the idea that London is filled with beauty and potential despite the ugliness and negative perception they have of it. At the very start of the piece he claims, “Dull would he be of soul who could pass by/ A sight so touching in its majesty”. The “he” represents any critics of this view of London who typically would be the realists and the idea of “could pass by” is how they could discount the unarguable beauty that is this view of a morning in London. He purposefully includes this provoking idea to directly engage pessimistic contemporaries who write off London as being a complete negative. By doing this, he is arguing for more optimism to create change. The rest of the poem shows conditional beauty, so he’s not blind to London’s faults, but he disagrees with the realistic technique of only showing negative and uglier viewpoints to create change. This poem is a fantastic challenge in the context of its historical context to rally contemporaries in solving an issue they all view as needing to change.

Another argument Wordsworth presents in this piece is that London has so much potential and beauty in it due to the people inside of it. The last piece of the poem reads “the very houses seem asleep;/ And all that mighty heart is lying still”. In this, he uses houses to represent the people inside of them as asleep. This idea of “that mighty heart” being their potential to be great and it’s “lying still” being the state of which it is stagnant. He is implying that if these people were to awaken metaphorically, they, being the heart of this city, have so much potential to effectively create change and make the city great. Instead of viewing the idea of this stagnancy and ugliness that many realist writers see, he is choosing to portray the people as the solution to create what both romantics and realists wish to see. Again, he is challenging his more pessimistic colleagues with this idea of viewing what could be rather than what is.

It can be argued that this poem is a pivotal moment where he began to develop into a conservative perspective that was prevalent in his later life. However, this poem is one of the strongest examples of how far his romantic optimism went. He took a fairly agreed upon ugly example of society and turned the negative view on its head by using romantic ideals to present a more optimistic viewpoint on an issue. By using conditional examples of beauty, a provocative challenge to colleagues, and a presentation of an optimistic solution, he fully encapsulates the romantic ideals with seemingly juxtaposed focal point of observation and therefore argues for the use of optimism in even the ugliest of settings. The struggle between pessimism and optimism was incredibly prevalent in the historical context of this era, but it is also prevalent in today’s age with similar discussions of how ugly industrialism has been for earth and its peoples.