UNIT 3: WILLIAM WORDSWORTH : "COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE, SEPTEMBER 3, 1802"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- gain an idea of the context in which the poem was written
- grasp the content of the poem in a detailed manner
- analyse the style and language of the poet
- appreciate the reflective bent of the poet's mind as evident in the poem

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is a continuation of the previous unit. We have already discussed the life and works of the poet William Wordsworth. In the present unit, we shall deal with his poem "Upon Westminster Bridge" which will take up the context, explanation and themes of the poem. You shall be further acquainted with the style and technique of the poet.

3.3 TEXT OF THE POEM

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

3.4 CONTEXT OF THE POEM

"Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" was written about an experience that took place in the summer of 1802 during a trip to Calais, France with Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy Wordsworth. The poem draws upon the experience of viewing the bustling city of London from Westminster Bridge early in the morning when it seemed to be "asleep". A diary entry dated July 31st, 1802 from Dorothy's journal speaks exactly of the same scene that Wordsworth describes in the poem and thus, it seems that Wordsworth mistook the date when the poem was published in 1807 as *Poems in Two Volumes*. However, the poem is remembered not for its objective description of a true biographical event but as a beautiful description of a sleepy London morning.

It is written in the form of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet in iambic pentameter with ten syllables per line. It has the rhyme scheme

abbaabbacdcdcd. A Petrarchan sonnet like other sonnets is composed of fourteen lines and is usually divided into two parts, one with eight lines (an octave) and the other with six lines (a sestet). The ninth line is where the poem usually makes a turn and seeks to elaborate on the subject in a new way or to introduce something completely different. Wordsworth introduces the idea of beauty and describes the scene in the first eight lines and then in the last six lines, he returns to the idea of unparalleled beauty and goes on to compare the city to the country.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is the form of the poem?

Q2. What is a Petrarchan sonnet?

Q3. When was the poem written?

Q4. What is the poem about?

3.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

The sonnet begins with a description by the speaker of the view he has of the city of London early one morning from Westminster Bridge. From lines 1 to 8, the speaker declares that he has found the most breathtaking sight on earth and that one had to be of a "dull" mind to not appreciate the beauty of that London morning. The speaker suggests that London is wrapped in the beauty of the morning as if it is a "garment" that the city is wearing. Everything seems silent in the early hours of the morning and all the sights of the city, its ships and domes and theatres are all magnified in the beauty of the morning. He mentions that the city in its morning slumber seems devoid of its usual pollution and the sights rise up in front of him in the "smokeless air" and city seems open "unto the fields, and to the sky".

In lines 9 to 14, the speaker reinforces the idea of unparalleled beauty and says the sun has never shone more beautifully anywhere and that the speaker has never felt such deep calm before. He goes on to personify the river and

its movement as it glides along slowly and majestically. The poem ends in an exclamation and a burst of emotion where he imagines the city as being asleep before preparing itself for another busy day.

Wordsworth's opening statement may seem strange coming from a Romantic poet as he praises and describes the beauty of the city instead of the country. The statement that suggests "earth has nothing to show more fair" than this sight of London in the morning seems at odds with the romantic poet's notions regarding the city's artificiality and the awesomeness of nature. It may be noted that there is no mention of nature or reference to it until line 7 where he views the city as being open "to field and sky". Whereas the poet of the romantic age sought to distinguish the city from the countryside to the distinct advantage of the country, it must be noted that the view of London on that morning sought to distinguish London from its usual characteristics of the city. It is a view of a city before it wakes up and starts being a city. Whereas the city is not a part of nature, it may be seen that it is not in conflict with it either and the city may be said to have a 'natural' air about it in the early morning which is elucidated further in the next line when the poet says the city shone bright in the "smokeless air". It is a rare glimpse of a sleeping, unpolluted city before it wakes up and gets busy turning into its usual self.

The poet continues surprising the reader when he goes on to say that the sun has never shone more beautifully anywhere, even on "valley, rock or hill" and that he has never felt so calm and deep as he feels then at the sight of the London morning. He then proceeds to personify the river that flows according to its own "sweet will" and says that it feels like the heart of the city was lying still while the houses seemed asleep and the entire city wore the beauty of the morning like a garment.

Let us now take a closer look at the poem and go through it in detail.

Earth has not anything to show more fair: (line 1)

The opening statement through which the speaker states that he has found the most beautiful sight on earth immediately draws in the reader's attention to

the poem. Whereas the speaker says that he has found the most beautiful view and earth has nothing better to offer, what he really wishes to stress on is the intense emotions felt at the moment of viewing the scene and the fact that the speaker at that moment felt like there could be nothing better than that. The focus is on the intensity of feeling that makes one believe that they are indeed viewing a truly majestic sight.

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty (lines 2-3)

Instead of immediately revealing to the reader what this view is, the speaker says that a person who would not appreciate the beauty of the particular sight would have to be very dull in nature without a taste for beauty. The next line with its use of the words 'touching' and 'majesty' seem to portray a feeling of intimacy and that of grandeur. The speaker feels close to and yet awed by what he views.

This City now doth, like a garment, wear

The beauty of the morning; silent, bare, (lines 4-5)

It is in these lines that the reader learns of the time of the day that the speaker seeks to describe. The poet says that the city wears the beauty of the morning like a "garment" and thus there is this implicit feeling that the beauty of the view lies in the morning that London wears as a garment and not in the city itself. It hints at the possibility of momentary, transient beauty of the city as against the more stable permanent beauty of nature. London looks beautiful in the morning, when it is calm and asleep and it will probably cease to be beautiful once the garment of the morning is lifted from it. "Silent" seeks to reinforce the time of the day, that is, early morning and hence the silence. "Bare" one feels could be in reference to the objects of the city in the next lines that seem to be bare under the cloak of the morning.

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie

Open unto the fields, and to the sky; (lines 6-7)

The sights of the city, the man made structures of ships and towers and theatres all seem to stand out and are magnified in the beauty of the morning.

These artificial structures seem and are indeed natural to the landscape of the city and the feeling is that of a mutual coexistence of the city and of nature. These structures lie bare under the beauty of the morning and seem 'open to the fields and to the sky'.

All bright and glittering in the smokeless air. (line 8)

All the sights of the city seem to be glowing in the light of the morning sun. "Bright and glittering" seem to suggest an element of movement and may hint at the fact that the view is not a static one but constantly changes as the morning spreads over the city and the sun shines brighter. Also, the learner must remember that the view the poet describes is from the coach of a train while it stopped over Westminster Bridge in London. While the poet may have viewed the sight from a stationary carriage, the train eventually moved towards its destination and the poet had to leave behind the sight and move away reinforcing suggestions of movement although the word "glittering" here probably only refers to the changing colours of the morning.

"Smokeless air" is important here as it describes a rare moment in the city when it was not shrouded in smoke from chimneys or industries. This line ends the octave of the sonnet. It may be noted that lines 1 to 8 read as one sentence.

Never did sun more beautifully steep

In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill; (lines 9-10)

The speaker reverts to his claims in the beginning of the poem and goes on to say how the sun "in his first splendour" has never shone this beautifully even on valleys and rocks and hills as it does on the city this morning. First splendour basically means the sun's first rays in the morning.

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

The river glideth at his own sweet will: (lines 11-12)

The speaker continues describing the effects the magnificent scene has had on him and says that he has never felt that sense of intense calm. It is surprising that a huge bustling city makes him feel that way but we have to remember that the view of the city in the poem is that of the city while it lies sleeping, that is,

still and quiet and unlike its busy self. Also, the fact that Wordsworth who lived in the most scenic regions of England found this to be the most magnificent sight could be explained by the fact that the unusual or the alien, impresses upon our senses more acutely that the everyday and the regular. The speaker then goes on to personify the river and describes it as taking her own sweet time flowing through the city. This personification perhaps gives us a sense of intimacy regarding the view which till now was just the poet's description of the view in sight.

Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;

And all that mighty heart is lying still! (lines 13-14)

The poem seems to end in an exclamation and burst of emotion and the personification of the river in the earlier line continues as he describes the houses as being asleep and the entire city looks like a sleeping body wearing the morning's beauty like a blanket or a shirt. "Mighty heart" probably refers to the energy and bustling vitality of a city like London which seems to be lying still in the city's morning slumber. One may notice that there is a rising of emotions throughout the poem which comes to a peak in the end with an exclamation to God.

3.6 POETIC TECHNIQUES

Taking inspiration from the French Revolution and the changes that it brings about in society, Wordsworth sought to write poetry in the language of the common man. By and large, he stuck to the rules laid down by himself in his 1802 Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads,* believing that poetry should stick to the language of common speech instead of adhering to stilted and structured forms that characterised poetic diction. Recovering "the naked and native dignity of man" forms part of his poetic project and even today, his style remains plain-spoken and easy to understand, notwithstanding changes in the rhythms and idioms of common English since the early nineteenth century. For him, spiritual delight was discoverable only through nature and the imaginative

innocence that is synonymous with childhood. His unrestrained reverence for nature takes on a more sombre tone and becomes less starry-eyed as he grows more orthodox in his perspective on the relations between man, nature and God. His *Immortality Ode* laments this loss of naïveté. But memory plays an important role in preserving that which is lost. Wordsworth's images and metaphors mix natural scenery, religious symbolism and relics of his rustic childhood. Emotions take centre stage in Wordsworth's poetry, belonging as it does to the Romantic era. This emphasis on subjective feelings and experience is highlighted in his very own definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings from emotions recollected in tranquillity". The key words here are 'spontaneous', 'emotions' and 'recollected'.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Explain the line: "All bright and glittering in the smokeless air."

Q6. Write a note on Wordsworth's use of language.



3.7 LET US SUM UP

A brief description of Wordsworth's poetic techniques paved the way for our discussion of the prescribed poem by Wordsworth included in the course. We have seen how Wordsworth employs the form of the sonnet to speak of a certain London morning and having studied the features of Romanticism and Romantic poetry, we can better evaluate and comment upon the portrayal of nature in the poem in relation to the depiction of the city of London. Learners are further encouraged to read more of Wordsworth and the other poets of that age to further substantiate their study of Wordsworth and of Romanticism in general. Also they encouraged to read on the French Revolution and how it had impacted the Romantic Age.



3.8 FURTHER READING

1. Daiches David. (2001). *A Critical History of English Literature*.Vol. 4. New Delhi : Allied Publishers.

2. Legouis Emile. (1994). *A Short History of English Literature*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.

3. Sarkar, Sunil Kumar. (2003). *A Companion to William Wordsworth*. New Delhi : Atlantic.

4. Ousby Ian. (1992). *Companion to Literature in English*. London : Cambridge University Press.



3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1 : The poem is written in the form of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet in iambic pentameter with ten syllables per line.

Ans to Q2 : A Petrarchan sonnet is composed of fourteen lines and is usually divided into two parts, one with eight lines (an octave) and the other with six lines (a sestet). The ninth line is where the poem usually makes a turn and seeks to elaborate on the subject in a new way or to introduce something completely different.

Ans to Q3 : The poem was written in the summer of 1802 during a trip to Calais, France with Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy Wordsworth.

Ans to Q4 : The poem draws upon the experience of viewing the bustling city of London from Westminster Bridge early in the morning when it seemed to be "asleep".

Ans to Q5 : All the sights of the city seem to be glowing in the light of the morning sun."Bright and glittering" seem to suggest an element of movement and may hint at the fact that the view is not a static one but is

constantly changing as the morning spreads over the city and the sun shines brighter.

Ans to Q6 : Wordsworth sought to write poetry in the language of the common man. Wordsworth by and large, stuck to the rules laid down by himself in his 1802 Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads,* believing that poetry should stick to the language of common speech instead of adhering to stilted and structured forms that characterise poetic diction. Recovering "the naked and native dignity of man" forms part of his poetic project and even today, his style remains plain-spoken and easy to understand, notwithstanding changes in the rhythms and idioms of common English since the early nineteenth century.



3.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Give an account of the early morning scene of the London society from the Westminster Bridge as described by William Wordsworth.

Q2. Write a critical appreciation of the poem "Upon Westminster Bridge".

Q3. Comment on Wordsworth's language and poetic style.

Q4. Explain with reference to the context:

"Earth has not anything to show more fair:

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty"

Q5. Explain with reference to the context:

"Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

All bright and glittering in the smokeless air"

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