

William Wordsworth
Westminster Bridge
More challenging questions!

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"Westminster Bridge" is a sonnet written in the classic Italian or Petrarchan form. It can be broken into an OCTAVE and a SESTET, with each line of verse having 10 syllables of iambic pentameters. Its rhyme scheme is also classic Petrarchan: abba cddc / efefef.

The poet personifies the city, seeing it as an exquisite woman who is dressed in the shimmery beauty of the early morning. She is still asleep and silent, the curves of her body -- the domes of the cathedrals or "temples" and theatres -- outlined through the filmy, misty material. The city is portrayed as having a heart -- the principle of life -- which is beating very slowly in her slumber. The sun too is personified, rising at dawn in absolute splendour. The poet is caught up in a feeling of AWE or RAPTURE. He cannot believe it possible to witness anything more beautiful than this. Anyone who could walk by without noticing it, he said, would have to be dead in spirit.

Remember that the London of Wordsworth's day would have been a heavily polluted city. Smoke from thousands of fires would have hung over the city like a black cloud and darkened the buildings with soot. On this particular morning, however, the air is smokeless so that everything appears bright and glittering in the light of the rising sun.

1. This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning.
 - Explain the image used in these two lines. Indicate how the poet's choice of words throughout the octave enhances this image. (4)
 - Why should the circumstances on this particular morning have been different from on any other morning? (4)
2. The sestet examines the peace and tranquillity of the city and the river.
 - What words in particular enhance the poet's perception? (4)
3. The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!
 - Explain the image used in these two lines. (4)
4. A knowledge of Wordsworth's poetry leads one to conclude that the poet is probably a pantheist.
 - What is a pantheist? (2)
 - How does your knowledge of Wordsworth being a pantheist alter the way in which you understand the poet's portrayal of London on this particular morning? (4)
5. This sonnet can be said to portray a deeply spiritual experience.
 - By examining the words and images used throughout this poem, how would you justify such a claim? (4)
6. What are the themes of the OCTAVE and the SESTET? (4)

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