Composed Upon Westminster Bridge

William Wordsworth
The Poet - Wordsworth

• Williams Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth in Cumberland in 1780.
• Wordsworth attended St. John’s College in Cambridge but often spent holidays traveling to places famed for their beautiful landscape. In 1790 he visited Revolutionary France and supported the Republican movement.
• Wordsworth fell in love with a French woman, Annette Vallon and had his first child. However due to tension between Britain and France, Wordsworth was unable to see his daughter during the Napoleonic War and was said to be depressed.
• Died in 1850, at the age of 70 years old. Wordsworth was buried at St. Oswald’s church in Grasmere.
The Era – Napoleonic Era

• The poem, *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*, was written on the 3rd of September in the year 1803, the day Westminster Bridge was opened to the public. At the very start of the Napoleonic Era. The Napoleonic Era is a period of history in France and the rest of Europe from 1799 to 1815.

• New ideas of Liberalism and Democracy has sparked from the French Revolution, something that Wordsworth’s supported, being, before the war, a strong supporter of the Republican movement.

• Tensions between France and Britain made it near impossible to let people travel between countries, leaving Wordsworth unable to visit his daughter and leaving him depressed.
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 the 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!
Analysing the Poem

• In the first three lines, Wordsworth set the scenes while creating an air of suspense. We are told that Earth has nothing fairer and that it’s a sight so touching that only a dull person would be unable to pass it by and yet he does not name what this sight is.

• The next two line leaves the reader surprise as we found out that this amazing sight is, a city. The reader sees that Wordsworth has a deep appreciation of London, but as the fifth line reveal, only in the early hours of the morning.

• In line six, there’s a distinct absence of detail by Wordsworth. This gives the imagery of the city being looked at from above. If it was being looked at from ground level then the buildings listed would be in more detail than from above. This is also emphasised by the lack of sounds and olfactory however this does not neglect imagery but rather enhances it. The reader can now see a very vivid setting of London from above.
• In the seventh line, the theme of nature co-existing with man is introduced as these manmade buildings, “Open unto the fields, and to the sky,”

• The sestet begins on line nine and here we have a slight subject change. Wordsworth stops merely describing London and begins to talk more about nature. Surprisingly he uses words that you might expect more from a poem about his home region, the Lake District, such as: “valley, rock or hill;”

• The word “steep” is used to describe the sunrise for the reason to appeal to our senses. Our sense of touch is brought into use, making us feel the warmness from the rays.

• Words such as “bright”, “glittering” and especially “smokeless air” are used to describe the manmade features of London in a way that makes them feel more in tuned with nature, a far cleaner London that really exists.

• The single word “splendour” is used to explain the grandeur of the scene before Wordsworth.
The final line of the poem gives the sense that London is the heart of England and taking into the account of the date, the heart of the world. And yet Wordsworth finds that he prefers this “mighty heart” when it’s lying still, something that usually alludes to death. However Wordsworth prefers London this way, without the hustle and bustle of everyday life, but rather a nice peaceful sunrise. Considering he grew up in the Lake District it’s not surprising he likes his peace and quiet.
Language Techniques

Firstly, Wordsworth uses rather simple language to get the point across of London’s unsophisticated beauty. However he does use the odd language device to get his point across.

• The scenery of London is brought to life by personification. Wordsworth uses Earth as an entity capable of action. Meanwhile the city is able to wear a garment.

• The simile in line 4, “like a garment wear…”, tells the reader in a subtle way that London’s beauty is only passing. That London won’t be wearing this beautiful garment for long.

• Finally in line 13, the houses are personified to be asleep. Generally when someone is asleep there’s a sense of calmness around them. Wordsworth exclaims “Dear God!” for the houses are usually alive with activities. And yet these sleepy houses are far more pleasant when they’re asleep.
Composed Upon Westminster Bridge is a petrarchan sonnet, which is comprised of an octet and then an sestet. The octet is used to describe London and its manmade features while the sestet is more focused with the nature of the region.

The rhythm scheme is that of a typically petrarchan sonnet, ABBAABBA in the octet and a scheme of DEDEDE in the sestet. This boring scheme matches the simple language of the poem to get across the message, that London’s beauty is simple and should not be overlooked.

Composed Upon Westminster Bridge has an iambic pentameter. This is where each line consists of 10 syllables, half of them being long and heavy syllables followed by 5 short syllables.

To show his thought process, Wordsworth uses commas to break up the rhythm of the line.
The meaning of *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge* is at first straightforward, the beauty of London. And in the end, that’s the meaning of the poem however there’s a few other lesser meanings as well.

- Wordsworth believe that London’s beauty is unsophisticated but still amazing.
- There’s only an appreciation for London’s beauty in the morning not in the day.
- That London is the heart of Britain and perhaps the rest of the western world.
Of course, for all the cynics in the classroom like myself. Most likely Wordsworth was paid to write a nice poem about Westminster Bridge and London unlike the far more accurate poem of industrialised London by William Blake.