PRE-1915 GCSE Poems

by

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English Association Bookmarks
No. 77

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

The aim of this Bookmark is to provide GCSE candidates in ENGLISH LITERATURE with commentaries which will assist them in understanding their prescribed selections of poetry. Rather than recommend critical reading for GCSE pupils, this Bookmark suggests further reading: usually, one or two poems related to the studied poem.

Historical trawling of the GCSE specifications for ENGLISH LITERATURE reveals that, ever since 1988, the subject specialists at the examination boards have shared a common purpose in compiling their selections of poetry: around certain poems, a consensus has grown up. Trawling the websites of AQA, EDEXCEL, OCR and IGCSE confirms that, for the series of GCSE examinations beginning in Autumn 2015, as for the series which concluded in Summer 2014, the subject officers have chosen a number of very familiar poems: 'old chestnuts' or 'usual suspects', as it were. Few English teachers will therefore be surprised to discover at least ten old familiars among the titles for the exegeses which follow:

1	Shakespeare	**Sonnet CXIV (116)**
2	John Scott	**The Drum**
3	William Blake	**London**
4	William Blake	**The Tyger**
5	William Wordsworth	**The Prelude [= The Stolen Rowing-Boat]**
6	William Wordsworth	**Composed upon Westminster Bridge**
7	John Keats	**When I Have Fears**
8	John Keats	***La Belle Dame sans Merci***
9	John Keats	**Bright Star**
10	P. B. Shelley	**Ozymandias**
11	Alfred Tennyson	**The Charge of the Light Brigade**
12	Robert Browning	**My Last Duchess**
13	Thomas Hardy	**The Man He Killed**
14	Edward Thomas	**Adlestrop**

BOOKS TO READ
Five anthologies which include the ten usual poems (written before 1915) are

Touched With Fire, Cambridge University Press 1985.
Poems on The Underground, Cassell, 1991.
The Nation's Favourite Poems, BBC Publications 1996.
By Heart: 100 Poems to Remember, Faber 1997.
Poem for the Day, Chatto & Windus 2001.

1 William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
SONNET CXVI /116 (1609)

It is imperative to read **Sonnet CXVI** in context. If it is read in isolation, out of its original sequence, *as occurs on GCSE syllabuses*, then readers will not be aware that, first and foremost, **Sonnet CXVI** (116) is a retort to **Sonnet CXV** (115).

In **Sonnet CXVI**, Shakespeare's aim is to express a counter-intuition: for an Elizabethan poet, what is counter-intuitive is the idea that the love between two people *can* withstand the power of time. Traditionally, Elizabethan poets – not least, Shakespeare in his sonnets – lament the fact that such love is not strong enough to resist the passage of time; and, indeed, in **Sonnet CXV**, Shakespeare expressly acknowledges the power of 'reckoning time' and fears its 'tyranny' [= its tyrannical effects upon man's best intentions]. Here, however, he contradicts such a complacent acknowledgement and argues strenuously to the contrary. In **Sonnet CXVI**, then, we hear a voice arguing loudly against the basic, conventional assumption of **Sonnet CXV**.

Both the banns read before 'the solemnisation of matrimony' ("If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it") and a condition in the wedding service itself ("If any man do allege and declare any impediment ...") allow for the possibility that there may be a lawful 'impediment' to the marriage. For the purpose of this poem, Shakespeare writes as if the common 'impediment' to the success of a marriage is not some legal quirk, but the law of time, the corrosive effect of passing time; but he then argues dramatically that it has no power to affect those marriages that are 'of true minds'. In **Sonnet CXV**, Time causes millions of 'accidents' that 'divert strong *minds* to the course of *altering* things' [my italics]; here, on the contrary, 'the marriage of true minds' will remain unaltered by its workings.

The sonnet, a strict form imported from Italy in 1540 by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, consists of fourteen lines of rhymed iambic pentameter. Nowhere is the consequence of this form felt more immediately than in the opening of this sonnet where the metre is responsible for the rhetorical ordering of the words:

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments.

Given this metre, Shakespeare does *not* write: "Do not let me admit impediments to the marriage of true minds." Instead, he inverts his word-order: that is, he inserts the

dative phrase ('to the marriage of true minds') between the adverb ('not') and the verb ('admit') and thereby marks his theme: namely, that he will have no truck with any suggestion that anything can come between two soul-mates. "Love," he continues, shaking his spear at any potential objectors, "is not love which alters when it alteration finds." The course of true love, *as defined here*, by means of a nautical image, does not alter as soon as the wind blows in another direction.

The structure of the sonnet (as developed by the mediaeval Italian poet, Petrarch) is of an octave in which the poet sets out a thesis and a sestet in which he sets out an anti-thesis. At the ninth line comes the turn (or the volta) at which point the poet is required to execute a rhetorical about-turn and start arguing against the proposition that he set out in his octave. **Sonnet CXVI** has no such structure. In this sonnet, Shakespeare, as readers can hear, is in an argumentative mood from the start; from the start, he is reacting to conventional wisdom and pointing out to its proponents that, about the nature of love, they are wrong. At the start of the second quatrain, that rhetorical "Oh, no" –

> Oh, no, it is an ever-fixèd mark,
> That looks on tempests and is never shaken

– marks not a change of mood, but the first reinforcement of the resolution with which he began. It signals not a change of direction, but a clearing of the throat and a raising of the voice. To illustrate his resolution, Shakespeare uses a nautical analogy: 'an ever-fixèd mark'. Love, in this extended metaphor, is 'the star' – presumably the North Star, the Pole Star – by which every lost ship can take its bearings. In this imagining, it is a cosmic constant, a permanent fixture in the heavens by which the mariner can steer a steady, undeviating course through any number of storms ('tempests').

The sestet begins with a third statement [= a second re-statement, a second reinforcement] of Shakespeare's thesis: 'Love's not Time's fool'. In the form in which he imagines it here, Love is not susceptible to the contemptuous movement of time. Even though it exists within the dimension of time, comes within Father Time's 'compass', Love has acquired from somewhere a capacity to proceed unscathed by 'his bending sickle'.

To conclude, Shakespeare makes even grander claims ... For Love, there is no day of 'reckoning': far from being subject to 'time's tyranny', it is free of all constraints and can boast an infinite capacity to endure – 'even to the edge of doom'. The couplet expresses a supreme confidence in this capacity and sounds like a brag:

> If this be error and upon me proved,
> I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Consider, though, an alternative interpretation ... Couldn't this sonnet be expressing a conventional, traditional attitude after all? The couplet may not be a rhetorical flourish, a flamboyant signing-off, a finale, but be more complicated than that. Quatrain by quatrain, Shakespeare could be stating his case with increasing conviction only in the end to confront it with an implicit alternative ... After all, the couplet involves a hypothesis: 'If this' [= my faith in Love's enduring power] is 'proven' to be misplaced,

then I have misread human nature – and, yes, I'll eat my hat. If a man's love for his mistress cannot stand the test of time, but 'alters ... with his brief hours and weeks', then true love *as I have defined it* does not exist and I may as well not have written this sonnet arguing that it does. Gymnastic though such thinking is, the conditional tense of the couplet accommodates it, inviting every lover/every reader to test the hypothesis against his/her own experience.

Further reading
Shakespeare: **Sonnet XVIII/ 18**
Shakespeare: **Sonnet XXIX / 29**
Shakespeare: **Sonnet CXXX/ 130**

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2 John Scott (1731-1783)
THE DRUM (1782)

For this poem, the historical background is supplied by the French Revolutionary Wars which began on 1st February 1793 when the French First Republic – acting on the French Revolutionary principles of "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" – declared war on Britain and Holland. At the time, George III (1738-1820) was King of England and his Prime Minister was William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806).

Although the first events of this War (at Toulon and off Genoa) did not take place until September and October of 1793, anti-war feeling among liberals of the time ran high, nowhere higher than in Britain's Quaker community. The Society of Friends (the Quakers) was a major contributor to the climate of rational dissent in Georgian England, petitioning Parliament (eg. on slavery in 1783) and holding pacifist views; as a consequence, they became victims of political prejudice and were barred from standing for parliamentary election. It was not therefore surprising that educated Quakers sought an outlet for their views in a variety of provincial newspapers and magazines.

The Drum first appeared as **Ode XIII** in John Scott's *Poetical Works* (1782) but found a wider public when it was reprinted in *The Cambridge Intelligencer* on 3rd August, 1793. *The Cambridge Intelligencer* was an English weekly newspaper: appearing from 1793 to 1803, it was edited by Benjamin Flower and was one of a number of provincial papers opposed to Pitt's bellicose administration. Flower (1755–1829) was a radical journalist and a political essayist: from the outset, he was an outspoken opponent of Britain's involvement in the French Revolutionary Wars and was naturally sympathetic to Quaker opinion. **NB.** Anti-monarchist and pacifist, Flower might be understood today as a Jeremy Corbyn figure.

For his part, John Scott was a wealthy Quaker from Amwell in Hertfordshire: as a pacifist and a political activist, he was a welcome contributor to Flower's journal. **The Drum** is an anti-war poem in which Scott is writing not specifically about the war with France, but more generally about the function of 'the drum' in the process of military

recruitment. **The Drum** is a protest poem in which Scott protests in the first person against the tactics of eighteenth-century recruiting officers. His aim is to record two reactions to the sound of the snare-drum which recruiting sergeants – such as Sergeant Kite* – can be heard beating at the head of a detachment. Scott organises his hostile reactions into two symmetrical octaves, each consisting of four rhyming couplets and each beginning with the same couplet:

> I hate that drum's discordant sound,
> Parading round, and round, and round:

The pictured scene is of a small platoon marching round a market square in a provincial town, such as Cambridge or Lichfield or Shrewsbury, attempting literally to drum up support for a war-effort. In both octaves, the iambic tetrameters of the verse reproduce the beat of the drum; in order to amplify the monotony of this beat, one preposition ('round, and round, and round') is used three times and all sixteen of the sixteen rhyme-words are monosyllables. The regular rhythm [= an iambic metre] and the monosyllabic repetition combine to echo the percussive cacophony that Scott loathes and prepare us for his conscientious objections to its noisy insistence: namely, that it convinces credulous young men to join up. In both octaves, Scott's use of the demonstrative adjective both locates the sound of 'that drum' within earshot and accuses 'that ... sound' of complicity in an institutionalised deception. After hearing it, he struggles – it seems – to rid his mind's ear of the insistent sound, not least because it occasions in him a bout of moral tinnitus.

In the first octave, Scott tells us that he hates the 'discordant sound' of the snare-drum because it deceives young men ('thoughtless youth') into thinking that enlistment in His Majesty's army will bring them nothing but 'pleasure'. Consequently, his tone is indignant; he feels that Britain's youth is being lured from both town and country ('from cities and from fields') into a fatal commitment. He feels that these young men are being led astray by a false form of glamour ('glittering arms'); sadly, they – the poor bloody infantry – will see not service, but servitude. The young men whom 'the drum' recruits believe that they will realise a noble 'Ambition'; instead, ironically, they will meet their premature deaths in 'foreign lands'.

In the second octave, Scott tells us that he hates the 'discordant sound' of the snare-drum because it 'talks' to him of the wide-scale devastation ('ravaged plains') which military combat inevitably causes. To illustrate the scale of this devastation, he compiles a list of the gruesome effects of warfare: 'burning towns' and 'mangled limbs' – not to mention the collateral damage ('widow's tears and orphan's moans') for which such warfare is to blame. In this octave, the young men who enlist inspire Scott's pity. He regards them as gullible, raw recruits for whom nothing but misery is waiting. In his final analysis, 'the drum' does nothing but add to 'the catalogue of human woes'.

Further reading
*George Farquhar: **The Recruiting Officer** (1706)
A. E. Housman: **A Shropshire Lad XXXV** (1896)
Thomas Hardy: **Drummer Hodge** (1899)

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3 William Blake (1757-1827)
LONDON (1793)

W. H. Stevenson (*The Poems of William Blake*, Longman 1971) reminds us that Blake's SONGS OF INNOCENCE (1789) "is a kind of chap-book of poems in the tradition of Isaac Watts' *Divine Songs for Children* (1715)" and that each song was designed to teach the children who sang it a moral lesson. Stevenson further reminds us that, although Blake published SONGS OF INNOCENCE separately both in 1789 and in subsequent years, he published SONGS OF EXPERIENCE, completed in 1793, never separately, but always and only in conjunction with his earlier collection. The reason is that Blake became primarily concerned to dramatise the ironic contrast between 'the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul' (as he describes them in the sub-title of the original edition). On the one hand, there is innocence, an ideal state in which children from the countryside south of the River Thames remain capable of good and great things and to which the adjective 'green' is systematically applied; strangely, there is no single song in SONGS OF INNOCENCE which describes this ideal place. On the other hand, there is experience, as is to be found in the real world north of the River Thames in which children have been corrupted and indoctrinated by adults and for which the adjective 'dark' does frequent service. The song which describes this real place is **London**.

SONGS OF EXPERIENCE – in which **London** was originally the eighth of twenty-one poems – are designed "to set the adult experience of real life against the innocent pre-suppositions of children who have not experienced it" (Stevenson). The pattern of juxtaposition is intended to illustrate vividly the kind of spiritual change upon which Geoffrey Keynes comments: "This poem is one of Blake's most outspoken protests against the effect of industrial civilisation upon the life of the individual." In SONGS OF INNOCENCE, the poems that best depict the pastoral idyll to be enjoyed by the innocent souls on the Surrey station are **Laughing Song**, **The Echoing Green** and **Nurse's Song**. There is also **Holy Thursday** which begins:

> 'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
> The children walking two and two in red and blue and green,
> Grey-headed beadles walked before with wands as white as snow,
> Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames waters flow.

As Robert F. Gleckner points out, there are two levels at which this poem, a song of innocence, can be read. Ostensibly, the poor children of the parish should be grateful that the beadles ('wise guardians of the poor') have shown charity to them/taken 'pity' on them and not given them up to the nasty, brutish and short lives of chimney sweepers or prostitutes which would otherwise await them; at the same time, "the children clearly are disciplined, regimented, marched in formation to church in the uniforms of their respective schools – mainly to advertise the charitable souls of their supposed guardians." As a delicious consequence, the simile – '*like* Thames waters flow' – begs a question which is of supreme importance for the city in which St Paul's Cathedral stands: *just how do* Thames waters flow? In **London,** it is this question that Blake takes up.

During Blake's lifetime, London was a city in a state of flux: in 1750, it had a population of 700,000, rising by 1801 to 960,000. It was a real city, a place of considerable squalor through which Blake in his poem is moving as in a nightmare. As a result, he intends a sardonic conflict between the alternate rhymes of his ballad quatrains and the grotesque experience which they describe:

> I wander thro' each chartered street,
> Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

Although in Blake's time the River Thames was an open sewer, his concern here is not with the pungent filthiness of the waterway, but with a political and social injustice: enclosure. Between 1760 and 1820, the common land of England became 'enclosed': that is, taken into private ownership. In **London**, Blake is concerned with the capitalist alliance between George III's Government (under the Tory Prime Minister, William Pitt) and the bankers and the merchants who profited from this nationwide re-drawing of rights, implemented by the granting of charters: indeed, research of Blake's manuscripts reveals that he changed his adjective from the concrete 'dirty' to the abstract 'chartered'. In 1791, Thomas Paine (**Rights of Man**) wrote:

> It is a perversion of terms to say that a charter gives rights. It operates by a contrary effect – that of taking rights away. Rights are inherently in all the inhabitants; but charters, by annulling those rights in the majority, leave the right, by exclusion, in the hands of a few ...

To open his poem, Blake uses the adjective 'chartered' first to describe 'each ... street' of London and then to describe the River Thames: whereas his first use may refer plainly to the private ownership of urban properties, his second use may not refer to riverside moorings and warehouses, but be ironic. How do Thames waters flow? Answer: in an orderly fashion. Even stretches of the flowing river are treated as if they are commercial commodities to be controlled and sold off: territorial waters, as it were. I am not enough of a scholar to know whether 'chartered Thames' is a satirical reduction to absurdity of the contemporary obsession with property rights ***or*** whether, beyond satire, it is a grim description of the lengths to which aristocratic landowners and their lawyers did go.

The style of **London** is characterised by Blake's use of repetition. The systematic repetitions are responsible for the tone of the poem: as Blake walks the 'chartered streets', he 'marks' the signs of suffering on the faces of the Londoners whom he encounters and he pities them. When it is repeated, 'marks' [= the verb 'to notice, to take visual note of'] involves a mournful, rueful pun; it becomes 'marks', the noun for the scars of a suffering both physical ('weakness') and spiritual ('woe'). In Blake's song, London remains the recognisable location of William Hogarth's **Gin Lane** of 1751, but portrayed with a much darker humour.

Blake's account of London gains momentum by moving from one repetition to another. In the second quatrain, he leaves behind 'marks' only to pick up from 'every face' the adjectival 'every':

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear –

By his sixth use of 'every', he has established the comprehensive scale of the misery; by means of iambic tetrameter, repeatedly placing a stress on the first syllable of the word, he has conveyed a dynamic sense of the ubiquitous wretchedness, a condition engulfing and oppressing an entire community of city-dwellers. It is instructive that this experience of the city should be auditory: that every human 'cry' should in the end equate in Blake's imagination to the sound of rattled chains. Research reveals that Blake's original phrase was 'German-forged': presumably, this compound coinage is designed to indict the Hanoverian dynasty for having imported such torments into England's rich and fruitful/green and pleasant land. Very significantly, the change to 'mind-forged' implicates Londoners in their own plight; radically, 'mind-forged' implies that the 'manacles' on the wretches are not metal, but mental – and that London's oppressed citizens, contemporaries of Victor Hugo's miserable Parisians, are partly to blame for accepting Hanoverian tyranny and Tory exploitation.

For the rest of the poem, Blake continues to 'hear' alarming things. By means of a dash, his second quatrain segues grammatically into his third where the conjunction ('how') relies for its meaning upon the verb of the previous sentence:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackening Church appalls;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

The elliptical grammar and the repeated words (a seventh 'every', a third 'cry') account for the cumulative forcefulness of Blake's indictment. Furthermore, they bring about a change of Blake's tone – from a compassion for the marked faces that he meets to an exasperation with the many manifestations of social horror: eg. boys sold into seven-year apprenticeships as chimney sweepers, girls sold into brothels as prostitutes. The function of this third quatrain is to condemn the complacent attitude of British institutions to such abuses: the respective treatments of children by the Church, of soldiers by the State. In this context, the first sentence of the quatrain requires exegesis: in what sense does the boy's cry 'appall'? Until The Chimney Sweepers Act of 1834, there was no effective legislation to protect children from this dangerous and dirty work. Surely, Blake's point is that the Church of 1790, represented by every church building, is *not* appalled [= disgusted] by child labour and that it ought to be ..? Doesn't he therefore mean that every cry from a chimney sweeper, burnt at work, *disgraces* every churchman whose building has been turned soot-black, a visible sign of this disgrace? Isn't there a subtle conflict between 'blackening' and 'appalls' [= literally, 'turns pale']? Isn't Blake implying that hypocritical clergymen should be literally 'pale' [= appalled] with shame? The second sentence requires even more conjectural exegesis: in what sense does a 'sigh' run 'in blood' down a wall? Here, the reference may be to the political slogans which – in red paint, symbolic of the blood of fallen soldiers – had been daubed on the walls of Hampton Court Palace.

It is on his nocturnal ramblings through the metropolis ('midnight streets') that Blake's vision becomes almost apocalyptic. At the start of the fourth quatrain, there is another modulation of tone. He lowers his voice ('But most ...') and explains that the sound which ultimately horrifies him is the 'curse' of the 'youthful harlot', the post-pubescent child whom her impoverished parents have sold into prostitution at Spitalfields Market. Her expletive

> Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
> And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

London is a place in which there is no innocence, not even for 'new-born' babes; rather, it is a system in which innocent bodies-and-souls are immediately entrapped, duly exploited and finally infected. As Blake moves on to his final line, his verbs alliterate ('blasts'/'blights') and express his rising anger that the procreative process is diseased to a critical extent. According to his analysis, the thirteen-year-old prostitute 'blights with plagues the Marriage hearse' because the client who impregnated her will have returned to his respectable wife and passed on to her a venereal disease from which she too will die. In a closing crescendo, the powerful oxymoron 'marriage hearse' suggests that nobody is immune to the bubonic blight that pervades this society, for, by the stage that the poem describes, it is a society in which even virtue ('marriage') does no good.

If **London** has a companion-poem, then it is not to be found in SONGS OF INNOCENCE (1789) which precede SONGS OF EXPERIENCE (1793). It pleases me to imagine that, for a possible companion-piece, we must wait until 1804 when Blake declares that he 'will not cease from mental fight' until, in place of London, he has built an altogether different kind of city.

Further reading
William Blake: **Jerusalem** (1804)

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4 William Blake (1757-1827)
THE TYGER (1793)

It is not possible to approach **The Tyger** except by way of **The Lamb**, Song XV in *SONGS OF INNOCENCE* (written four years earlier). Diametric though their differences are in both form and subject, the two songs share an identical preoccupation: with the nature of the Creator. It is axiomatic with Blake that there is a Divine Creator; for the purpose of his songs, he takes a monotheistic approach and assumes that there is One God ... *of some kind*. These two songs, in particular, want to know what He is like. They share a sustained inquisitiveness about the Creator: whereas the eponymous lamb is quite evidently the work of a benevolent Creator, the eponymous tiger – equally evidently – is not.

William Blake's SONGS OF INNOCENCE (1789) derives its inspiration from Isaac Watts' DIVINE SONGS FOR CHILDREN (1715) in which the songs are designed to teach moral and religious lessons. Accordingly, **The Lamb** is a poem of the utmost simplicity and by itself belongs to the didactic tradition in which Watts was working. In **The Lamb**, Blake adopts an inquisitive tone, but stays in a simple register and uses a great deal of gentle repetition. The resulting style creates the impression that this lyric, if not of a hymn, is of a nursery rhyme or a child's song.

Blake accompanies the song with an illustration of a naked child standing in front of a flock of lambs, one of which she is feeding. It is clear that this child is the singer of this song. In the first verse, the child can be heard addressing the 'little lamb', asking it one question in words of one syllable:

> Little Lamb, who made thee?
> Dost thou know who made thee?

The first verse is entirely in the interrogative mood. It consists of ten lines [= five rhyming couplets] which amount to an extended interrogation of the eponymous lamb, designed to impress upon the creature how grateful it should be for the 'food' it has received, for its 'woolly' clothing and for its 'tender' bleat to which children in the surrounding 'vales' respond with delight. It is no accident that the lisping consonants ('little lamb') and the ovine vowels ('softest clothing') succeed at the same time in reproducing the voice of a kindly adult speaking to a child, himself wrapped in 'woolly' clothing and eager to hear the comforting answer for which the speaker's tone has prepared him. Just as the child seeks to assure the lamb that a benign Creator provides for it, so the adult seeks to assure the child [= a metaphorical lamb] that he belongs to a benign order of things in which he need have no fears.

In **The Lamb**, Blake gives a conventional account of Christianity. His repeated question – 'who made thee?' – is significant in that it enables him to account for Creation by reference to One God who has 'made' little lambs and little children all in His own image; for the purposes of this poem, he is content to endorse or pay lip-service to the contemporary doctrine of creationism. The rhetorical movement of the lyric means that the second verse is ready with a symmetrical answer:

> He is meek and he is mild;
> He became a little child.
> He is called by thy name,
> For he calls himself a Lamb.

In Blake's **Jerusalem**, the Baby Jesus is specifically 'the lamb of God'. Likewise, each speaker to be envisaged here – both the child to the lamb and the adult to the child – is a child of God:

> I, a child, and thou a lamb,
> We are called by his name.

Like both a lamb and the child who is pictured feeding a lamb, the adult poet is a member of a flock of which – according to **Psalm 23** – the Lord God is the shepherd: as

a result, the child (literally) has no difficulty in identifying with the lamb and the adult (metaphorically) has no hesitation in relating to the child [= his 'little lamb']. The premise for this poem is the harmonious oneness of God's creation. For this reason, the lamb, with its white fleece, is an incarnation of innocence on two levels. On one level, it remains itself, a meek and mild creature in animal form; on the other, it becomes representative of Jesus Christ, a babe ('He is meek and he is mild') who embodies these same traits in human form. This account of Christianity, then, is of a loving religion that embraces all creatures great and small, especially small. **NB.** Mrs C. F. Alexander's **All Things Bright and Beautiful** was first published in **Hymns for Little Children** in 1848.

In 1793, Blake published SONGS OF INNOCENCE and SONGS OF EXPERIENCE together in one volume: there, he indicates that he is proposing to dramatise the ironic contrast between 'the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul', for that is how – on his frontispiece – he describes 'innocence' and 'experience'. Blake, then, writes **The Tyger** (Song XI in SONGS OF EXPERIENCE) expressly to establish a contrast with **The Lamb**; this contrast will be between the innocent and ideal world that he envisages for **The Lamb** and the harsh and hostile world that he reveals in **The Tyger**. Both poems, remember, are songs: that is, they are lyrics that can be set to music and sung as hymns by impressionable children in their churches. Even though their forms differ conspicuously, both poems take animals for their subjects and meditate, not upon their zoological features, but upon the respective parts that these creatures play in Creation: what kind of Creator does each imply? to what extent is each reflective of Him? What becomes evident is that their parts are not so much contrasting as conflicting. So sharp is this conflict that it becomes difficult to think of Sunday School children, if they are 'little lambs', as conventionally portrayed, singing this hymn to the voracious tiger ...

By contrast with **The Lamb**, **The Tyger** is a poem of the utmost complexity and does not lend itself easily to study at GCSE Level. At the same time, it does belong to Isaac Watts' tradition, for Blake derives the memorable incantation with which it begins from Watts' hymn "Great God, how terrible thou art". As John Holloway points out, God – in Watts' hymn – is 'a bright and burning fire' whose 'eye burns with immortal jealousy'. This – as Holloway observes – was 78 years before Blake asked:

> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Quatrain form, but still interrogative mood ... Consistent with his approach in SONGS OF INNOCENCE, Blake is still organising an ontological inquiry: if a benevolent God created the lamb, what kind of God created the 'tyger'? Rather than dispense with his monotheistic approach, Blake juxtaposes the two 'contrary states' and frames a series of searching questions ...

In **The Tyger**, Blake asks no fewer than fourteen questions. Not one of these questions is answered, not because they are all rhetorical questions and not because they are directed to a dumb animal, but because it is no part of Blake's *present*

purpose to say who 'made' the tiger and thereby put in place his own concept of God. This is not because he has not worked out his own concept; that, truly, is another story for another day, a very long day too ... No, each of these quatrains ends with a question-mark because he has no aim *in this poem* other than to be subversive. In **The Tyger**, Blake's purpose is not to advance his own view, but to subvert the complacent acceptance of Christian orthodoxy.

Geoffrey Keynes contends that Blake's questions invite the politicians and the priests of his day to solve 'the riddle of the universe'. What, of course, Blake well knows is that his 'riddle' is beyond any powers of solution that organised religion appears to possess and that no revised definition of God's nature will emerge. The point of his relentless questioning is therefore to draw attention to an embarrassing vacuum in theological thought and expose Christianity – as explained in **The Lamb** – for a convenient fiction or even a fraudulent invention. To this end, the capital T of 'Tyger' is "no matter of mere eighteenth-century capitalization" (Holloway) but a means of insisting on an exact equivalence between Lamb and Tyger: either both are Sons of God or neither is. "Which is it?" Blake demands to know. This is an awkward ultimatum: by shaping the argument in this binary way, he is of course seeking to test the conventional and established concept of Gentle Jesus, Son of a Forgiving Father ... It can be argued that **The Tyger** derives its power not so much from the questions themselves as from the cumulative effect that the sheer number of them creates.

Blake does not write about God's creatures in any naturalistic way. If **The Lamb** is not altogether about a lamb, then **The Tyger** is even less about a tiger: where, after all, do we look for any 'symmetry' – 'fearful' or otherwise – in the stripes of a tiger? Docile and endearing, the lamb appears both as itself and as a guarantee that the meek are blessed and may therefore expect to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; for any purpose that it selects, the tiger – by contrast – can boast a fitness [= a 'symmetry'] to be feared and thereby intends a more menacing fate for all things meek and mild. In **The Tyger**, the function of the animal is almost entirely representational or symbolic; in the song, the tiger is not so much a physical creature as a moral or spiritual power. To argue that the woolly lamb represents the forces of good and that the sinewy tiger represents the forces of evil would be simplistic; at the same time, the elements that compound the tiger do seem to imply a far more inhospitable and unwelcoming world. Far more than it endeavours to describe an animal in the 'forests' of India, Blake's language ("What dread hand?") signals that the tiger represents a God who gets angry and retaliates, a God who can feel wronged and wreak revenge. His vocabulary – 'fire', 'hammer', 'chain', 'furnace' and especially 'anvil' – further suggests that this God, the creator of the tiger, is not unlike Hephaestus, the Greek god of blacksmiths; his very forging of the tiger precludes any theory of evolution and strongly supports a violent form of creationism. For a third time, Blake, in his endeavour to identify the true nature of the Divine Creator, deploys the noun 'dread' as an adjective:

> What the anvil? What dread grasp
> Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

What kind of Creator is capable of getting to grips with the 'deadly terrors' of the tiger? Answer: a Creator to be dreaded. Blake's extended metaphor ('hammer',

'furnace', 'anvil') likens the 'work' of creation to a manufacturing process for which this Dreaded Creator has registered the patent. As an oppressive and rigorous forge-master, the Divine Being, whose 'immortal hand and eye' have made the world, has little in common with the benevolent God portrayed in **The Lamb** and instead becomes fierce and judgemental.

In **The Tyger**, Blake is especially keen to explore what the tiger tells us about the Creator. Few theological questions are more challenging or potentially more devastating:

> When the stars threw down their spears
> And watered heaven with their tears,
> Did he smile his work to see?
> Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

One reason for feeling that **The Tyger** may not be an ideal poem for study at GCSE Level is that this vital quatrain relies for an interpretation on some knowledge of the English poet Milton and the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Both **Paradise Lost** (1667) and Swedenborg's **Heaven and Hell** (1758) avail themselves of the idea that Satan is a rebel angel who, after being cast out of Heaven with a host of other rebel angels, has continued to pose a threat to all human souls. In this complex mythology, each rebel angel takes the form of a star; consequently, 'the stars' – in this quatrain – are imagined as having surrendered to God [= thrown down 'their spears'] and wept in despair at his display of superior and terrifying power. In this penultimate quatrain, Blake concentrates on the fundamental contradiction of Christianity: by this stage, his questions have become rhetorical, culminating in that explicit demand to know how 'God' can at one and the same time be a God of Love (a Lamb) and a God of Terror (a Tyger). Such questions are designed to promote the conclusion that this contradiction is "not a sacred mystery of religion, but a stupefying fraud" (Holloway).

According to Michael R. Burch, Blake did not see the Creator as a kindly and omniscient God, but as Urizen, "a forger of pre-existent matter"; in Blake's mythology, the Creator is not a wise father, but "an incompetent and repressive slave-master". For this reason, Blake is first and foremost "a stern critic of the black-robed priests" of that alternative myth, Christianity.* He suspects that God *as conceived by the Christian church* does not exist and he sets about discrediting the facile proofs with which the Church (of England, of Rome) likes to satisfy itself. Quixotic though it is, Blake's view has substance: in response to the inconsistencies of Christian teaching, he places an alternative construction upon the relations between Urizen and His creatures, basing it upon a firm foundation of observable fact. His questioning is not therefore a function of any uncertainty on his part. On the contrary ...

For the narrative of **The Tyger**, Blake relies upon the Biblical idea that God created Adam by a touch of His hand; to this extent, the poem is informed by the image that Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome in 1512. Specifically, Blake attributes the Act of Creation to the hand of God, extending the metaphor of the hand (used four times) to the 'grasp'/'clasp' rhyme in the fourth quatrain. Readers of **The Tyger** will also notice that he wrings changes on the verb that applies to this hand, varying it between 'could' (used twice and implied six times)

and 'dare' used four times. In the first quatrain, the modal verb 'could' indicates that the 'art' required to generate a 'deadly' tiger – the manual dexterity ('hand') and the visual precision ('eye') – is a matter of capacity; in the second and the fourth quatrains, it becomes apparent that a formidable audacity ('dare seize', 'dare ... clasp') is also involved. In the final line of the poem, that choice of verb – "Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" – confirms that only a supreme and supernatural power [= 'an immortal hand or eye'] could have both the capacity and the courage to handle the ferocious tiger. Because the final quatrain is a word-for-word repetition of the first quatrain, readers can react to the odd-word-out as if it represents a dramatic change of emphasis – when in fact 'dare', used here for the fourth time, is rather less artful: first, it replaces 'could' simply in order to preserve a balance between Urizen's dexterity and temerity; second, it **re**-emphasises Blake's consistent belief that any confidence in a sympathetic Creator – as preached by organised religion – is seriously misplaced. **The Tyger** thereby sounds a dire warning: if readers were contented by the comfortable equations expressed in **The Lamb**, then they'd better beware, for Creation is not entirely like that ...

Further reading
***** William Blake: **The Garden of Love** (1791)

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5 William Wordsworth (1770-1850)
THE STOLEN ROWING-BOAT
from THE PRELUDE or The Growth of a Poet's Mind (1798)

In 1690, John Locke (**An Essay Concerning Human Understanding**) expounded his theory of perception. Wordsworth's poetry is informed by Locke's theory of perception, an epistemology which – inadvertently or otherwise – it serves to endorse. In Book Two of his **Essay**, Locke (1632-1704) concentrates on objects in the external world and makes a fundamental distinction between their 'original or primary qualities' [= 'bulk, figure, texture and motion'] and their 'secondary qualities' [= 'colours, sounds, tastes &c']. Uncontroversially, Locke argues that objects in the external world exist independently of perception; according to his philosophy, the 'primary qualities' of a physical object are those qualities that an object (eg. the 'huge peak, black and huge' of Wordsworth's poem) possesses in itself and would possess "even if there were no sentient being to perceive them" (John Hospers 1967). More controversial is Locke's definition of 'secondary qualities'. In Chapter VIII, he writes:

> What I have said concerning colours and smells may be understood also of tastes and sounds, and other the like sensible qualities; which, whatever reality we by mistake attribute to them, are in truth nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us; and depend on those primary qualities ...

Not for the first time in Chapter VIII, he is arguing here (in Paragraph 14) that the 'secondary qualities' of an object, though we may 'mistake' them for qualities inherent in the object itself, are *not* in 'reality' properties of that object, but incidental 'powers' which the object has 'to produce various sensations in us': viz. rudimentary sights and sounds, smells and tastes. Wordsworth has no argument with Lockean orthodoxy, for he too believes that natural objects (rocks, trees) are active, capable of *producing in us* reactions in the forms of sensations. Where Wordsworth parts company with Locke is in his concept of the possible scope of the reactions that nature can produce.

Reading **The Prelude**, it becomes apparent that Wordsworth's poetry endorses Locke's epistemology *only up to a point*. In Wordsworth's opinion, Locke's theory of perception is simplistic: if its range of 'secondary qualities' encompasses only material sensations, then it is inadequate and incomplete, for it leaves out of account those more personal reactions to objects in the natural world to which the poet's own experience can testify. According to Wordsworth, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Locke's philosophy. What interests him are the more complex reactions to things in nature, responses which are without rational or scientific basis; to borrow a phrase from an early draft of **The Prelude**, he is ultimately concerned with the 'influence of natural objects' on the human imagination.

In the summer of 1798, Wordsworth undertook a tour of the River Wye. On 13th July, he sat on 'the banks of the Wye' and, 'a few miles above Tintern Abbey', wrote the 160 lines which explain his own way of thinking. It is in **Tintern Abbey** (as the poem is known) that Wordsworth, less cautiously and more radically than Locke, identifies greater 'powers' in the objects of the natural world and suggests that they exercise a wider scope. One way of expressing this intuition would be to say that, at the same time as we perceive 'the wild green landscape', the landscape – reciprocally – 'perceives us'; what is more, the landscape may be envisaged as having a power of its own to affect us *for the better*. If men grow up in a natural environment, then – argues Wordsworth – this non-human environment (eg. the Lake District) can *edify* them: that is, educate them morally, raise them intellectually [= inspire in them 'elevated thoughts'] and uplift them spiritually. From his vantage-point above the Wye, Wordsworth claims to have seen 'into the life of things'. The Romantic visionary in him detects an inter-dependence between man and his natural surroundings, contending that man will be morally, intellectually and spiritually enriched if he accepts and embraces it, but impoverished if he denies and rejects it.

In **Tintern Abbey**, Wordsworth recalls that, in his 'boyish days', he sought nothing more than the immediate pleasures that proceed from contact with nature; now, aged 28, his contact with the natural world is more than simply sensuous. In his later tranquillity, he recollects the spontaneous emotion that arose from his earliest contacts with nature, but concedes that 'the time is past' when such contacts were traumatic shocks to his senses which came with 'aching joys' and 'dizzy raptures'. It therefore pleases him to report that, for 'such loss', there has been 'abundant recompense'. Subsequently, he has 'learned to look on nature' not in a purely empirical manner as he did in his 'thoughtless youth', but in a more pensive and sober mood. Nowadays, he is also aware that nature, at the same time as it enjoys a propensity to gladden hearts and inflame passions, has in addition 'ample power to chasten and subdue' – a power, of course, that it exercised in dramatic and spectacular mode after he as a boy stole the rowing-boat ...

Mystically, Wordsworth claims to have identified in nature 'a presence' that stimulates his personal growth. He has a 'sublime' sense that, by communing with nature, he has put himself in direct touch with the elements that nourish his human soul: 'the light of setting suns', 'the round ocean', 'the living air', 'the blue sky'. He implies strongly that human life and non-human life are 'interfused': in short, that there is an organic relationship between natural objects and 'the mind of man'. According to Wordsworth, there is 'a motion and a spirit that ... rolls through all things', thereby uniting man and nature ('this green earth'). The aim of **The Prelude** – not least of the passage in which the poet as a boy steals the boat – is to demonstrate this very inter-relationship, this unity. In conclusion, Wordsworth declares himself 'well pleased to recognise' in nature 'the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart': above all, she [= nature] is the 'soul of all my moral being'.

In **Tintern Abbey**, Wordsworth explains that, when he was a boy in Cumberland, he went 'wherever nature led'. In **The Prelude**, his primary aim is to illustrate the degree to which he received moral and spiritual guidance from this closeness to nature. Accordingly, it was nature which 'led' him to Lake Ullswater across which he then rows in the stolen boat: so powerful is the pull of nature, a 'nurse', a female force, that he was 'led by her' ...

For the purposes of his autobiographical epic, Wordsworth recollects those experiences from his Cumbrian upbringing which had a profound effect on his personal development and seeks to show how they shaped 'the growth of a poet's mind' ... In order to tell the full story of that 'summer evening' from 1780, he engages in a self-monitoring sort of observation and then a period of sombre reflection. From the outset, he is in some disquiet; his oxymoron ('troubled pleasure') reveals that he has mixed feelings about stepping into a boat which is not his own and rowing over the moonlit water. On the one hand, he is 'proud' of his 'skill' at rowing in a straight line across the 'sparkling' lake, a serene progress ('went heaving through the water like a swan') that the smooth movement of the blank verse enacts; on the other hand, he is uneasy with the sensations that this jaunt produces in him, an unease expressed by *nine* mid-line sentence-endings. As he rowed further out, he was able to see more of the 'craggy ridge' that ran above and along the shore from which he had pushed off; this, of course, was because he had his back to the lake and was facing 'that craggy steep'. It is this widening perspective which allows for the drama that then unfolds:

> I dipped my oars into the silent lake
> And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
> Went heaving through the water like a swan;
> When, from behind that craggy steep till then
> The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
> As if with voluntary power instinct,
> Upreared its head.

As an oarsman, the boy is in the paradoxical position of being able to see more of the 'huge peak' the further away from it he gets; the further away from the 'black and huge' peak that he rows, the larger it grows. His boat is stopped in its glittering tracks by that semi-colon after 'swan', followed – as it abruptly is – by the subordinate conjunction 'when' which ushers the peak into view. Consistent with Locke's theory of perception, Wordsworth presents this 'black and huge' outcrop as behaving 'as if

with voluntary power instinct' and brooding on his misdemeanour. Exhilaration gives way to trepidation: to convey this shift of mood, he personifies the outcrop:

> I **st**ruck and **st**ruck again
> And growing **st**ill in **st**ature the grim shape
> Towered up between me and the **st**ars, and **st**ill,
> For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
> And measured motion like a living thing,
> **St**rode after me.

Having raised 'its head', the 'grim shape' assumes a power of organic growth, a 'purpose of its own' and a 'measured' stride with which it *appears* to pursue him. It pursues him with a vengeance: in this verse-sentence, the pattern of st-alliteration, which enacts each stroke of his oars in the water, transfers itself to the rate at which the shape *seems* to come after him. "For so it seemed": ostensibly a casual interpolation, this locution is there not to pad out the iambic line, but to indicate exactly what Wordsworth is doing here ... He is attempting to draw his readers into a situation in which it makes sense to believe that an inanimate object has taken on a life of its own. To this extent, his simile ('like a living thing') is disingenuous, for his aim is to create the impressions that the black peak, to all intents and purposes, ***is*** a living thing and that it affects his consciousness accordingly.

Conditioned by his Cumbrian upbringing, Wordsworth entertains a radical notion: that neither rational philosophy nor science is competent to make complete sense of human experience. To the contrary, he implies that it is possible to make full sense of our experience only in imaginative or poetic terms. In recounting this episode, he is trying to persuade the sceptical reader that his concept of nature – as a force which has its own capacity [= 'voluntary power'] to affect 'the mind of man' and influence human feelings – is *poetically* sound. In his imagination, the mountain-peak becomes a monster which is chasing him because he has committed an act of petty theft. In a way which Locke would have *half*-recognised, that 'huge peak' *produces in him* a feeling of guilt – of which it then becomes an emblem; as imagined, it pursues him with such apparent determination that he is scared and/or shamed into turning the boat around and returning to the shore. Both awed and cowed by 'that spectacle', he struggles then to re-orientate himself, for it occurs to him that the looming up of the peak was not coincidental with his appropriation of the boat, but directly consequent upon it ... Additional to Locke's theory of perception, Wordsworth presents the black peak as having affected not only his consciousness, but also his conscience. The optical illusion – that the black rock is in 'motion' and actively in pursuit of him – takes on a moral dimension for which there is no rational explanation. In this situation, it makes *poetic sense* to believe that nature – in the 'grim shape' of the rock – has the power to admonish him and even to exact retribution. **NB**. In Locke's terms, 'motion' is not a quality of the object itself, but a quality that it appears to have.

The instant 'when' the mountain-peak becomes visible is a turning point in Wordsworth's development. It heralds the start of the experience that puts an end to his innocence and marks the stage in his personal growth when the transition between childhood and adulthood takes place; this transition – between the states of innocence and experience – he signifies by the contrasting images of the white swan

and the black peak. In short, that moment when the peak materialises above the horizon marks the moment when he begins to mature.

If the first half of the passage follows Wordsworth's observation of his experience, then the second half records his subsequent reflection on its potential significance. Under these circumstances, reflective thought is a tortuous process, halted by the mid-line interruptions to the iambic metre ('but after I had seen ...'/'o'er my thoughts ...') and hampered by the clumsy enjambments that follow them. Having taken the boat, he finds himself in a position where it *appears* that the forms of nature, previously 'glittering' and 'sparkling', are suddenly glowering at him, 'huge and mighty', reproachful and hostile. Faced by this sudden transformation, Wordsworth is bewildered and wonders what is going on; here, the language which he uses ('a dim and undetermined sense of unknown modes of being') is as vague as the psychological disturbance which he is struggling to understand and describe. In the aftermath of his experience on Ullswater, he starts to suspect that nature works in ways which he hadn't previously imagined, ways ('modes') of which he had hitherto been innocent. **NB.** To Wordsworth, the frightening quality of nature had been an unknown quantity, an unknown 'unknown' [= something which he didn't know that he didn't know].

Accordingly, he undergoes a change of personal identity. Until that moment of epiphany, of revelation, he had grown up thinking that the 'trees' and the 'fields' of his Cumbrian homeland were all 'pleasant': till then, they had remained sources of the original pleasure which he describes in **Tintern Abbey**. Following that scary moment, he finds himself in a 'grave and serious mood' because he can no longer make such simple sense of the natural world in which he lives and moves. To his dismay, he discovers that he has been deserted by the 'familiar shapes' of his childhood and become deeply troubled by the workings of the adult world into which he has progressed. Bereft of such friendly 'images', he traverses a different county; companionless and numb, he comes by his mature insight into the life of things and descends into melancholy and nightmare. Instead of the 'colours' of nature, he sees a greyness and a darkness; it is this unpleasant 'darkness' [= a form of depression] which hangs both literally and metaphorically over his thoughts, unsettling them both day and night. In conclusion, he develops a paranoid 'sense' that he is being continuously watched, supervised by a superior force, both judgemental and unsympathetic.

In **Tintern Abbey**, Wordsworth expresses his belief that, in a man's communion with nature, 'there is life and food for future years'. In **The Prelude**, he expands upon this view and maintains that 'there are in our existence spots of time' by which our imaginations 'are nourished and invisibly repaired'; he adds that 'such moments chiefly seem to have their date in our first childhood'. Throughout his work, Wordsworth ('The Child is Father of the Man')* keeps inquiring – in an almost pre-Freudian way – after the precise extent to which experiences in childhood shape character in manhood. This passage documents one such 'moment' from his 'first childhood' in which the earth moved and after which it never looked the same to him again.

Further reading
* William Wordsworth **Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections in Early Childhood** (1804)

6 **William Wordsworth** (1770-1850)
COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE (Sept 3, 1802)
NB. The date which Wordsworth gives is not the date on which he travelled to France, but the date on which he 'composed' the poem en route to Calais.

> ... we left London on Saturday morning at $^1/_2$ past 5 or 6, the 31st July (I have forgot which) we mounted the Dover Coach at Charing Cross. It was a beautiful morning. The City, St pauls, with the River & a multitude of little Boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke & they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly with such a pure light that there was even something like the purity of one of nature's own grand Spectacles.
>
> Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journal*, 31 July 1802

In this Petrarchan sonnet, Wordsworth's aim is not only to compose a picture of London, but also to capture a precious moment in which he was able to experience peace of mind. Despite the pictorial clarity of the description, London – as it appears to Wordsworth from Westminster Bridge on the morning of 31st July 1802 – is more important to him as an emblem of 'calm'; being temporary, its air of restfulness reflects his own mental state. For Wordsworth, 31st July 1802 was a turbulent time: on this morning, he was on his way out of London to France where his mistress Annette Vallon lived with their nine-year-old daughter Caroline; accompanied by his sister Dorothy, he was going to tell Annette of his plans to marry his childhood sweetheart, Mary Hutchinson. En route, their coach stops 'upon Westminster Bridge' from which vantage-point he is able to survey the city in the hour before the working day begins, an hour [= approximately 6.00 am] when it exists in a state of suspended animation.

As Dorothy reports, 'it was a beautiful morning'. In the octave, Wordsworth takes in the majestic view across the River Thames and sets out his thesis that "Earth hath not anything to show more fair". In his opinion, any man who failed to be impressed by this superlative vista would be 'dull ... of soul': that is, without the capacity for either aesthetic appreciation or spiritual enrichment. On this summer morn, the panoramic view of London from Westminster Bridge is 'a sight so touching in its majesty' that it inspires in him an awe. More precisely, Wordsworth's simile – 'like a garment' – suggests the rich cloth of a tapestry or an oil painting upon canvas. Why this should be so becomes apparent when he starts to account in detail for '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.

Wordsworth sees London ('silent, bare') in a state of unadorned simplicity.* It is supremely significant that its buildings 'lie open' to the countryside surrounding it: that is, open to the influences of nature. In short, it is significant that 'the City' – at this early hour of the day – is unlike a city: to be exact, that it is unclouded and

unpolluted by the smoke from thousands of chimneys and appears in a state of pristine innocence: 'glittering in the smokeless air'. **NB.** There is a painting of Westminster Bridge by Canaletto dated 1746.

Stalled 'upon Westminster Bridge', Wordsworth – at the age of 32 – takes stock of his personal circumstances and refers them to the becalmed condition of the city 'spread out endlessly' before him. In the sestet, he conveys his feeling by the serene movement of his iambic pentameters:

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

What gives him respite from his personal preoccupations is his revised perception of the place: from his current perspective, London looks transformed and utterly unlike itself. To explain, he sets out an ironic antithesis: that, at 'first' light, 'this City' is like the country. What he has encountered – at this splendid time of day – is an unprecedented quietness; more to the point, this aura has inspired in him 'a calm so deep' that it reminds him of the repose which he can experience in the valleys, rocks and hills of the Lake District where he was born in 1770. Like rocks, 'the very houses are asleep': ie. not yet polluting the urban atmosphere/in Dorothy's words, 'not overhung by their clouds of smoke'. Wordsworth's exclamation – "Dear God!" – expresses his surprise that the fires of hell are not burning in the chimneys and that the metropolis itself ('lying still') is exuding an air of rural tranquillity, even of heavenly stillness.* According to Dorothy, the sight was not only 'beautiful', but also spectacular: "such a pure light that there was even something like the purity of one of nature's own grand Spectacles." Given his personal troubles on 31st July 1802, Wordsworth is only too glad to stop and contemplate a heartland in such a 'pure' and peaceful condition.

***** Readers are invited to spot Wordsworth's deliberate mistakes. **1)** At one moment, the city is said to be wearing the morning 'like a garment'; at the same moment, its 'towers, domes, theatres and temples' are 'silent, bare'. **2)** At one moment, the River Thames is said to be gliding beneath the Bridge; at the same moment, 'all' that the poet surveys is said to be 'lying still'.

Further reading
William Blake: **London** (1793)
William Wordsworth: **It is a beauteous evening, calm and free** (1802)
Ray Davies: **Waterloo Sunset** (1967)

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7 John Keats (1795-1821)
WHEN I HAVE FEARS (1818)

> And this leads me to another axiom – that if poetry come not
> as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all
> To John Taylor on 27th February, 1818.

In this Shakespearean sonnet, Keats' aim is to put himself both as poet and as lover in his cosmic perspective. For this perspective, he relies upon Gloucester's vision (in King Lear Act IV Scene 6) of the samphire-gatherer on Dover Beach: "Methinks he seems no bigger than his head." When he is in danger of over-estimating his likely impact on the world, Keats imagines how he might look from a great height: that is, reduced to insignificance.

When Keats writes to John Taylor that poetry should 'come naturally', he is taking the professional pride of the Romantic poet in his ability to think in the traditional forms of English Literature. He is asking us to accept that he expresses himself in sonnet-form only if the thought takes on the organic/ natural shape of this form. Consequently, the octave of this sonnet (with a poignant proleptic irony) sets out his thesis that he may die before he has an opportunity to realise his potential as a descriptive poet of mediaeval romance; he fears that he 'may never live to trace' the beauties of nature: eg. dramatic cloud-movement. In order to articulate this fear, Keats compounds his octave of two quatrains in which two subordinate clauses of time fail to complete themselves:

> When I have fears that I shall cease to be ...
>
> When I behold, upon the night's starred face ...

So it is not the formal symmetry of the octave but the syntactical parallelism between the when-clauses that supplies this sonnet with its structure. Indeed, the sestet – rather than set out an antithesis to the thesis in the octave – simply extends this grammatical structure:

> And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
> That I shall never look upon thee more,
> Never have ...

It adds a fear: that, both beauty and love being transient, he may never again see the 'fair creature'/'la belle dame' to whom he is 'in thrall'. It is for the couplet that we must wait before the sonnet undergoes its logical development and concludes by telling us what Keats does when he has these 'fears':

> then on the shore
> Of the wide world I stand alone and think
> Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Whenever he is afraid that he will die before he has attained both intellectual and emotional fulfilment, he has only to isolate himself ('stand alone') on a desolate sea-shore in order to appreciate that, in this cosmic context, such egocentric concerns as

'love and fame' are of no ultimate importance/are reduced 'to nothingness'. Who is there in this 'wide world' to care that he – one solitary man – has not realised his ambitions and fulfilled his promise? It is on this note of existentialist desolation* that the poem ends.

Further reading
* Matthew Arnold: **Dover Beach** (1867)

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8 John Keats (1795-1821)
LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI (1819)

In Stanza XXXIII of **The Eve of St Agnes**, Porphyro takes up a lute and plays a traditional French song entitled 'La Belle Dame Sans Mercy'. In selecting this ancient ditty, he is choosing to serenade his lover with one of the ballads which the French troubadours sang on their travels through Provence in the thirteenth century. The significance of this particular song is that it concentrates upon the mercilessness with which beautiful women treat men; in **La Belle Dame Sans Merci**, Keats endeavours to explain what this mercilessness entails. It turns out that it is nothing so vague as inconstant or unkind behaviour; no, it is nothing less specific than the pain of male sexual frustration/male sexual longing for which all beautiful women are responsible.

In **La Belle Dame Sans Merci**, then, Keats' aim is to describe the condition of male lovelornness which results from the recurring desire to achieve sexual satisfaction. From a swift read-through, one might struggle to gather this impression; at first glance, the poem reads as if it is a simple ballad in which the balladeer has done no more than inquire after a knight's feelings and receive Feste's answer that he has been 'slain by a fair cruel maid'. Put this way, Keats' ballad amounts to no more than an adolescent lament about women's cruelty to men – set, what's more, in a fairy-tale land where (since people live happily after) this cruelty seems not to matter too much.

It is only when a reader grasps that Keats has encoded into his innocent quatrains graphic descriptions of sexual experience that the ballad becomes more precise, more realistic; indeed, once certain quatrains have been decoded, the poem becomes nothing less than an anatomy of the sexual act and its emotional consequences. In other words, it is not merely a clinical analysis of the act, an exercise in poetic bio-mechanics; rather, it takes its motivation from Keats' profound sense that he cannot have sex without suffering both emotional and psychological disturbance. In short, his ballad is a lyrical poem because – in spite of its code – he is writing about the repercussions of such intimacy for his sense of personal identity.

Decoded, the ballad presents us with an effective description of Porphyro's experience in **The Eve of St Agnes**. In Quatrain V, Keats' young knight recounts how he made a flower-chain for his lady's 'fragrant zone'; immediately after this vaginal image, he is as explicit as he dare be about their embrace:

> She looked at me as she did love
> And made sweet moan.

Exactly as Madeline – in Stanza XXXIII of **The Eve of St Agnes** – listened to Porphyro's rendition of the song and then both 'uttered a soft moan' and 'panted quick', the beautiful lady in his ballad looks up at her lover and makes 'sweet moan' as he brings her to a satisfying orgasm.

Quatrain VI attempts to analyse the knight's experience of this embrace. For his part, he sets her on his 'pacing steed' (an obviously phallic image) and is thereafter so overwhelmed by the physical sensation that he 'nothing else saw all day long'. No wonder: for her part, the beautiful lady – something of a sexual athlete – puts herself into non-missionary positions where penetration becomes more comfortable for both of them: 'for sidelong she would bend and sing a faery's song'. Sing a faery's song! As you do ... What is more, Keats attempts in Quatrain VII to suggest the effects of aphrodisiacs upon the knight and his lady. In this scenario, it is the woman who is feeding the man 'roots of relish sweet, and honey wild, and manna dew' in much the same way that Porphyro – in **The Eve of St Agnes** – fed Madeline from his sweet-trolley. In other words, Keats is here endeavouring to suggest the physical temptation of female flesh.

Twice in **The Eve of St Agnes**, Keats essays allegorical descriptions of sexual intercourse; twice in **La Belle Dame Sans Merci**, he represents this experience in a second codified form where 'fragrant zone' becomes 'elfin grot' [= her vaginal cave] and the beautiful woman's sexual ecstasies [previously, her 'sweet moans'] become sighs 'full sore'. Afterwards, Keats asks us to imagine that the knight and his lady fall asleep; it is on waking from his romantic dream that the knight – but not the lady – begins to suffer 'woe'. Keats is extremely precise about the nature of male woe, a condition which can 'ail' a man and leave him 'palely loitering'; this paleness, this 'woe begone' condition, is a direct and dramatic symptom of post-coital desolation – for which Keats frames the metaphor/metonym 'on the cold hill side'. For that pale and empty feeling immediately after orgasm, Keats repeats this metaphor; it is 'on the cold hill's side' that a man – in the period after sex – finds himself longing to repeat the act and experience the sensation again.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci is an analysis of male physiology: once a knight has experienced sexual ecstasy, he becomes enslaved ('in thrall' in Quatrain X) to the desire to enjoy it again. It is in this sense that every beautiful woman, every 'belle dame', is a woman without mercy ('sans merci') because her physical allure cannot help but keep arousing in a man this desire for sexual fulfilment.

Further reading
John Keats: **The Eve of St Agnes** (1820)

9 **John Keats** (1795-1821)
BRIGHT STAR (1819)

> I will imagine you Venus tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a heathen.
>
> To Fanny Brawne on 25th July, 1819.

In this sonnet, Keats' aim is to articulate his intense passion for Fanny Brawne, his next-door neighbour in Hampstead to whom he was betrothed at the end of his life. The love-poem takes the shape of a direct address to a star in order to give both cosmic scale and cosmic permanence to this passion. In the octave, Keats describes the precise sense in which he does not wish to be like the star:

> Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art –
> Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night ...

He does *not* wish to exist in glorious isolation ('in lone splendour'). Despite its romantic associations, he sees nothing attractive in the solitary life of a hermit, not least because – to extend the metaphor and complete the rhyme-scheme of the octave – such a star would find itself shining upon 'the moving waters at their priestlike task of pure ablution'; in other words, being 'steadfast' in its pursuit of celibacy ('priestlike', 'pure'). No, Keats is not at all interested in worshipping Fanny from afar:

> No – yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
> Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,
> To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
> Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
> Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
> And so live ever – or else swoon to death.

At the beginning of the sestet, he re-directs the movement of his argument by means of that rhetorical 'no' and then defines for us the sense of steadfastness in which he – as an ardent lover – is actively interested. In his antithesis, he uses 'still' twice and 'ever' thrice in an endeavour to stress that the steadfastness which he wants approximates to a permanent condition of physical closeness, an on-going state of sexual arousal – for which he finds an exquisite oxymoron 'sweet unrest'. In his adolescent fantasy, Keats wishes himself 'for ever' in bed with his 'fair love', his cheek in contact with her naked breast – so that, whenever he is awoken by its 'soft fall and swell', he finds himself in a state of sexual readiness/erect. His ideal joy is to 'live ever' in this improbable position. Failing that, he will come to orgasm [= 'swoon to death']: in other words, his only imaginable alternative is to ejaculate – for which 'to die' is a traditional metaphor. Physical closeness to Fanny* is such a powerful experience that it could easily overwhelm him in this way; it could bring about his 'death' because it would bring an end to the only condition – unrestful though it is – in which he wants to live. Not for the first time, the surface-texture of a Keats poem is designed to dignify that close proximity with female flesh in which he loved to exult. Decoded, **Bright Star** – like **La Belle Dame Sans Merci** – reveals a tension between an idealised presentation of love and the graphic physicality which lies beneath it. *It is extremely

unlikely that Keats consummated his love for Fanny Brawne; at the same time, it is virtually certain that he relied for his knowledge of sexual intimacy upon his encounters with prostitutes.

Further reading
John Keats: **La Belle Dame Sans Merci** (1819)
Robert Graves: **Counting the Beats** (1955)

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10 P. B. Shelley (1792-1822)
OZYMANDIAS (1818)

Shelley begins this sonnet by saying, "I met a traveller from an antique land ..." Well, yes, he did, but not face to face in the Egyptian desert as might at first appear. He did not meet such 'a traveller' literally ... *The circumstances under which this sonnet was composed were far less exotic and more mundane ...

For Christmas 1817, the banker and political writer Horace Smith (1779–1849) went to stay with Percy and Mary Shelley; over that festive period, Shelley and Smith took part in a game which was common within their circle of literary friends ... Today, it is difficult to imagine that a collection of poems from the 1820s could sell at the speed of a pop album in the 1960s or that two friends could ever amuse themselves by competing against each other to see who could write the better sonnet on the same subject. Already, two members of this same circle – Keats and Leigh Hunt – had challenged each other to write a sonnet on the subject of the River Nile; then, Shelley and Smith challenged each other to respond in sonnet-form to a topical announcement: namely, that a seven-ton statue of the Pharaoh Rameses II had been removed from a temple in the Egyptian city of Thebes and was due to be shipped to London. What Shelley and Horace Smith therefore did – for their festive entertainment of 1817 – was to find a fitting passage from *Bibliotheca Historica* (by the Greek historian, Diodorus of Sicily) and derive their respective sonnets from this text. It thereby transpires that **Ozymandias** (first published in *The Examiner* on 11th January 1818 under a pen-name) is not a lyrical reflection on an actual encounter, but a literary exercise. As it happens, the sonnet is not a personal reminiscence, but a dramatic re-telling of an episode that Diodorus Siculus (as he was known) records in his history of Ancient Egypt.

Bearing in mind the huge statue that England is about to import from Egypt, Shelley and Smith searched Diodorus' compendious work for the history of Ozymandias, for that is the Greek name for the Egyptian Pharaoh, Rameses II. For the purposes of Shelley's poem, it is then Diodorus who becomes the traveller 'from an antique land' whom Shelley meets: that is, meets *by reading his translated writing*. It is Diodorus who, by his writing, then acquaints the poet with the condition in which this Egyptian statue was found. To begin with, this statue is worth a look because of its proportions. In order to display his absolute power, Rameses II [aka Ozymandias] had built an immense and majestic palace at the front of which he had stationed a gigantic statue

of himself; it is across the ruins of this statue that the 'traveller' – centuries later – is 'said' to have stumbled. Shelley's sonnet, then, tells the story of this magnificent icon, reduced to rubble and condemned to indignity by the ravages of time. **NB.** It is more than likely that Shelley has in mind something on the scale of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, its dimensions detailed in the First Book of Kings, Chapter 6.

Shelley's octave is somewhat unusual in that it sets out not only the thesis of his sonnet – that Ozymandias was a mighty mogul – but also the antithesis: that the mighty must eventually and inevitably fall. In the first quatrain, the traveller's description is of 'two vast and trunkless legs of stone' off which the upper body – not only torso, but also head – is 'said' to have fallen 'on the sand'. The 'shattered visage' lies 'half sunk': still visible, however, are the facial expressions [= 'frown, a wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command'] which 'its sculptor' had had the skill to engrave on the stone and which continue to give a faithful reading of Ozymandias' 'passions'

> Which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things,
> The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:

Still 'stamped' on Ozymandias' face are the stereotypical characteristics of the tyrannical ruler. The sculptor, in mocking [= copying] the tyrant's features in one sense, is also mocking them in another, for each feature – 'frown', 'wrinkled lip' and 'sneer' – is a function of the hubris which was responsible for the arrogant commissioning of this statue in the first place. Nothing – as the sculptor foresaw – mocks that 'sneer of cold command' more mercilessly than the current situation of Ozymandias' broken statue 'on the sand'. Such terms are ironic at the expense of Ozymandias' vanity: specifically, they deride the hubristic contempt in which this mogul held all lesser men and prepare us for his nemesis 'on the sand'.

Shelley's **Ozymandias** is a sonnet in that it comprises fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, but pursues an unconventional rhyme-scheme and does not even attempt a transition between its thesis [= that Ozymandias is an imperious ruler whose almighty power no force can overcome] and its sestet [= that he is no such thing]. Although the octave comes to a grammatical end with that first colon, there is no turn, no volta, for the thesis, rather than end at that traditional point, continues into the sestet:

> And on the pedestal these words appear:
> "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
> Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

From that otiose 'sneer of cold command', the traveller turns his attention to the feet of the statue which remain literally where we'd expect feet to be: 'on the pedestal'. Like Shelley, Horace Smith was quick to seize upon the poetic potential of the inscription that it bears: "King of Kings, Ozymandias am I. If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my work." Smith's sonnet (first published in *The Examiner* in February 1818) is by no means an incompetent response to Diodorus' text, perceiving (as it does) how ironic the inscription is, but it fails ultimately to bring out that irony as Shelley's poem does. The irony, of course, is nothing less than the irony of the human condition: namely, that man – even the 'King of Kings' – is a finite creature in an infinite world.

Specifically, the theme of the poem is the irony of Ozymandias' life: put simply, how the 'Mighty' fall. Read not in its original context, but in its current state of desolation, that inscription measures the extent to which Ozymandias' supreme confidence in his 'works' was misplaced. Indeed, the very meaning of his imperative is reversed; circumstances – with the passage of time, his 'visage' lies 'shattered' and sunken in sand – have embarrassed his over-ambition and given his boast a meaning diametrically opposite to the fearsome meaning which he intended for it. To be exact, the 'Mighty' – even the Mighty – should 'look on' Ozymandias' works and 'despair', **not** because his palatial 'works' constitute an enduring monument to his invincibility and his immortality, but because – as 'that colossal wreck' conspicuously demonstrates – they don't. King of kings he may be, but Ozymandias, no different from any ordinary mortal, has been literally brought down to earth by the inexorable movement of time. Even the stoutest endeavours of the most powerful man on earth cannot stop the sweeping progress of time; even the great master and commander cannot marshal forces to halt its relentless march. **NB.** For the Latin epigram for this state of affairs, we must go back to the enthronement of Pope Alexander V in 1409: *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

Such is the organisation of the thought in this sonnet that it is left to the final three lines to clinch/seal the argument. Shelley makes his point with a prepositional wit, following that grandiloquent inscription with a three-word description which bluntly contradicts it: 'Nothing beside remains.' In coming straight after the proud boast, this description passes an instant judgement upon it, confirming – as it does – that 'nothing' of Ozymandias' grand design 'beside'/other than the fallen idol 'remains'; not a vestige of the enormous palace is – quite literally – left 'beside' his fragmented form. Even when Ozymandias' works stood, they stood condemned to 'decay' ... Shelley reinforces this point by the longer sentence of description with which the poem ends. The final image – of 'the lone and level sands' stretching into eternity – comments on Ozymandias' fate in a more solemn tone, for it is an image of the permanence that no man can achieve, further signifying that the erosive effects of time [= the sands of time] have all but obliterated Ozymandias' achievement and totally humiliated his ambition. Put another way, the theme of Shelley's sonnet is human transience; its bleak conclusion, echoing that Latin epigram, is that all things must pass. Men – and even the vast civilisations which they construct around them – are ephemeral, here today, but gone with the desert wind tomorrow.

Further reading
* John Keats: **On First Looking into Chapman's Homer** (1816)

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11 Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892)
THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE (1854)

The Charge of the Light Brigade (first published in *The Examiner* on 9th December 1854) is one of the most famous and memorable poems in the English language. This fame it owes both to the catastrophic event which it commemorates and to the dactyllic rhythm (from Thomas Chatterton's **Song to Aella**) which enacts this event for us.

The 'charge of the Light Brigade' (which took place in the Crimea on 25th October 1854) is a catastrophe that has gone down in the annals of military history. Misunderstanding an order, Lord Cardigan led a cavalry brigade (of 607 'horse and hero') in a charge of one-and-half miles against Russian artillery. According to the poet himself, **The Charge** was written (on 2nd December) after he had read a report of this disaster in *The Times* for 13th November which referred to 'some hideous blunder'.

The Charge of the Light Brigade celebrates Victorian values: in particular, it eulogises and sentimentalises both the rigid discipline and the sheer bravery of the six hundred British soldiers who rode 'into the valley of Death' (as the soldiers themselves called it). Given that these sabre-rattling horsemen were out-numbered, out-manoeuvred and out-gunned, it is politically expedient that Tennyson – in his description of this massacre – should place the emphasis not upon the blunder, but upon the heroic feats of the cavalrymen whose obedience to orders sent them *and* their magnificent horses charging to their certain deaths. In this context, it is worth noting that the Victoria Cross – that rarest of military honours – is awarded 'for valour' on active service.

That Tennyson's poem should have out-lasted the era for which it was written says much for his virtues as a poet: in particular, for his 'fine ear' (T. S. Eliot). The drama of the poem stems directly and uniquely from Tennyson's control of rhyme and rhythm. From the outset, the steady beat of his dactyls –

> Half a league, half a league,
> Half a league onward,
> All in the valley of Death
> Rode the six hundred

– is designed to monitor the galloping advance of the 2428 hooves towards the Russian guns one-and-a-half miles ('half a league') away; its systematic repetitions are metrically calculated to drum up a thunderous excitement. Nowhere is this technique more effective than in the second stanza where the thoughts racing through the men's minds are assimilated into the pounding of the hoof-beats:

> Their's not to make reply,
> Their's not to reason why,
> Their's but to do and die:
> Into the valley of Death
> Rode the six hundred.

Captured here is that unquestioning acceptance of authority/devotion to duty upon which Great Britain based its military discipline and ran its empire. Concealed by that contraction (their's) is the brutal attitude of the British class-structure to the men in

the ranks: that 'their [duty i]s' not to answer back, but to take for granted the divine wisdom of the orders issued by their superior officers. It would be pleasing to think that Tennyson ('Their [place i]s not to reason why') is being ironic at the expense of Lord Cardigan and Lord Raglan's ideas of themselves; unfortunately, it is more likely that he is endorsing this crass structure and simply praising the dead men for following their stupid orders.

In fact, Tennyson's aim is to stir up patriotic fervour/reinforce public support for British participation in the Crimean War (1854-1856). Nowhere are his strategic repetitions of monosyllabic rhymes and emphatic rhythms more dynamic than in the fifth stanza where the intensity of the action –

> Cannon to right of them,
> Cannon to left of them,
> Cannon in front of them
> Volleyed and thundered

– gives way to the solemnity of a body-count: 'not/Not the six hundred'. Complementing the dramatic modulation of tempo is an equally dramatic modulation of phrasing –

> They that had fought so well
> Came thro' the jaws of Death,
> Back from the mouth of Hell,
> All that was left of them,
> Left of six hundred

– which takes the casualties into horrifying account. In effect, these lines are no more than a simple re-working of the third stanza conducted in the bloody aftermath of the 'wild charge'; the difference lies in the fatal change of tense from past historic ('Boldly they rode so well') to pluperfect ('They that had fought so well'). The sentiment upon which the poem rests –

> Honour the charge they made!
> Honour the Light Brigade,
> Noble six hundred!

– reminds Queen Victoria's subjects that it is glorious to die for one's country and insists that they 'honour' the Light Brigade for its nobility in having carried out this kamikaze charge. It would take another seventy years before this piety – *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori** – would be exposed as a hypocritical piece of Victorian propaganda.

Further reading
* Wilfred Owen: **Dulce Et Decorum Est** (1917)

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12 Robert Browning (1812-1889)
MY LAST DUCHESS (1842)

Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion.
Tennyson: **The Princess** (1847)

In this dramatic monologue, Robert Browning's aim is to give us the Machiavellian character of Alfonso II d'Este, the fifth Duke of Ferrara (1533-1598) who in 1558 had married Lucrezia, the daughter of Cosimo I de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Whereas he was 24, she was 13 ... After Lucrezia died on 21st April 1561, at the age of only 16, the Duke became a suitor to Barbara, the daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I. On the occasion for this poem, he is to be imagined receiving an ambassador from Emperor Ferdinand's court – namely, one Nikolaus Madruz – who has come to prepare the diplomatic ground for his re-marriage. During the visit to arrange this marriage, he conducts the ambassador around his art gallery in which there happens to hang a curtained portrait of his late wife: his 'last duchess'. Accidentally-on-purpose, he pauses in front of this portrait, pulls back the curtain and embarks on a pointed monologue:

That's my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive.

It is immediately apparent that his 'last duchess' was by no means an old woman – nor even one of his own age (30-ish). It is therefore plain from the start that the Duke is choosing his words for sinister effect: his 'last duchess' is not necessarily his first and, merely 'looking as if she were alive', has in fact died a premature death. What is more, the Duke – by his subtle emphasis upon the adjective 'last' – is preparing to imply that the Emperor's daughter may not be his last duchess either if she fails to behave in the compliant and sycophantic manner which he expects of her. For the purpose of the poem, Browning is overlooking the probability that Lucrezia (his 'last duchess') died of tuberculosis and relying instead upon the rumoured possibility that she may have been poisoned.

Throughout his monologue, the Duke of Ferrara can be heard speaking with a deliberate theatricality. He invites the Count's ambassador to 'sit and look' at the 'pictured countenance' of his last duchess and then utters words to this effect: that no stranger has ever set eyes on Fra Pandolf's portrait of his last wife without asking him how she came to have such a winsome look on her face ... The Duchess's 'glance' – it turns out – is the delicate subject which the Duke is determined to raise:

Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much ...

... such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

The Duke's creed is that it is a woman's function to obey the commands of a man/a wife's function to do the bidding of her husband alone. To this end, he seems to tag every remark with an unspoken innuendo: "It was not only her husband's presence which made her look so happy, *if you see what I mean, sir* ..." Throughout his monologue, the Duke varies his sentence-lengths, but not his tone: varied though his inflections are, the same menace is implicit in every utterance. Every statement has an edge which inclines towards a sorry outcome for his next duchess if her father's ambassador does not see what he means and fails to report that she will need to devote herself exclusively to her husband.

In this monologue, Browning's feat is to compress the colloquial language that this controlling character speaks into rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter. So that his rhymes remain on station, he is constantly interrupting the movement of his speaker's syntax with enjambments and rhetorical interpolations ... The fortunate effect of this struggle to fit syntax to metre ("how shall I say?") is to create for his blue-bearded aristocrat an individual voice, a convincing way of talking. By this technical means, Browning gives the Duke's speech the hesitant rhythm that it might well possess if he were endeavouring to imply – as he is most certainly is – that his last duchess did not behave with sufficient decorum and consequently died in unfortunate circumstances.

It is clear from the Duke's anecdotal evidence that his last duchess was liable to blush – rather too deeply for his liking – at the courteous compliments which were inevitably paid to her. Given the Duke's proprietorial nature, this tendency to be too easily pleased ('too soon made glad, too easily impressed') becomes her hamartic element, the fatal flaw in her good nature. Such is the degree of his egocentricity [= the esteem in which he holds himself] that he cannot readily countenance the prospect of his wife smiling too radiantly – for whatever reason – at any other man who comes within her compass: 'her looks went everywhere'. He is letting it be known to the Count's ambassador that he regards this particular failure in a wife [= to discriminate between himself and all other men] as a kind of promiscuity punishable in the normal way.

It is highly unlikely that the Duchess was a Catherine Howard, enthusiastically dispensing her sexual favours to sundry admirers; more probably and tragically, she was nobody more culpable than a young woman whose face would light up at the simple joys of living. Her treason was to take a natural delight in 'a bough of cherries' or her 'white mule' rather than to reserve her special approval for her husband; according to the conceited Duke, presents from 'officious' courtiers and his own 'gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name' came all alike to her and he can't have that ..! That epithet 'officious fool' betrays his impatience with his last duchess's total lack of discrimination. Quite disingenuously, the Duke claims that he has no 'skill in speech': in fact, the sub-text of these jealous observations is to warn the ambassador that any future wife had better not be so ungrateful and undiscerning.

The Duke accepts that he could in theory have attempted to make his will clearer to her ... He begs, however, to point out that, even if she had 'let herself be lessoned', such instruction would in practice have involved him in 'some stooping':

> and I choose
> Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
> Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
> Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
> Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
> As if alive.

"If she doesn't know what's required of her, then I'm not going to tell her," remains his aloof and uncompromising stance. Since the Duchess had no idea what a possessive monster she had married, she continued to compound her mistake ('This grew') with the result that her husband finally 'gave commands' that she should meet with an accident. That promptly put a stop to her ubiquitous distribution of smiles: 'all smiles stopped together'. As a direct result, 'she stands' there not in person, but in a portrait, still 'alive', but not in the first and vital sense of that word.
Having had these words in the ambassador's ear, the Duke of Ferrara continues to conduct his guest around his museum of art-treasures. Once again, Browning ensures that there is a sub-text to the Duke's remarks which reveals his scheming character. His publicly-expressed confidence in the Count's munificence makes plain that his primary interest in the marriage is mercenary; he's in search of an 'ample' dowry. Indeed, he expresses his secondary interest in his new bride in language –

> Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
> At starting, is my object

– which reveals that she will be valued principally as a further addition to his collection of *objets d'art*. It is not insignificant that, as they descend the staircase, the Duke proudly directs the ambassador's attention to the bronze statue of Neptune that Claus of Innsbruck cast for him; by this juxtaposition, Browning signifies that the Duke's next duchess is to be little more than another addition to his collection: in short, a trophy wife.

Further reading
Alfred Tennyson: **Ulysses** (1833/published 1842)
Robert Browning: **A Toccata of Galuppi's** (1855)

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13 Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)
THE MAN HE KILLED (1902/published 1910)

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend"
from Wilfred Owen's **Strange Meeting** (1918)

As for **Drummer Hodge**, the background for this poem is the Boer War (aka Second Anglo-Boer War) which lasted from 11th October 1899 to 31st May 1902. An imperial war, the Boer War of 1899-1902 was fought in South Africa between British forces and the combined forces of the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State. For the purposes of this poem, Hardy imagines an inadvertent encounter between two soldiers on the opposing sides in this war. To this extent, Hardy's poem anticipates Wilfred Owen's **Strange Meeting** (1918) in which the meeting – there between British soldier and German soldier – is 'strange' because the two men, who in peace-time would have shared a drink together, try in war-time to kill each other.

Although **The Man He Killed** was a topical poem when it was written in 1902, it was not published until Hardy's collection **Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses** appeared in 1910: significantly, it was published with hindsight and placed in a collection in which Hardy's wider purpose is to reflect satirically upon a range of circumstances in which common mortals can find themselves. To this end, Hardy's speaker ('sat us down', 'off-hand like') expresses himself in the colloquial idiom of an ordinary countryman, a rustic fellow.

In the first quatrain, Hardy describes the cosy circumstances – 'some old ancient inn' – in which the two men would have enjoyed each other's company if they had not been foot soldiers ('infantry') of opposed nationalities; under any other circumstances, they would in all likelihood have sat together over a drink and befriended each other. In the second quatrain, Hardy reveals the cruelly ironic change of circumstances ('but ranged as infantry') in which – instead – they shoot at each other fatally.

In the third quatrain, the surviving soldier attempts to explain his murderous action. He asks himself why he has 'killed' a potential drinking companion and struggles ('because –/Because') to come up with a satisfactory, sensible answer. He recognises that he and his 'foe' share a common humanity: furthermore, that they may have enlisted in their respective armies for equally innocuous reasons: 'Was out of work – had sold his traps'. Hardy reflects upon the fateful circumstances under which these similar men – perhaps, both game-keepers – became mortal enemies; it was with a casual disregard for the full implications of their enlistment ('off-hand like') that both men had found themselves pitched into battle against each other. In other words, there was no good 'reason why' they should have been trying to kill each other.

In the final quatrain, Hardy reaches a philosophical conclusion: that war is 'quaint and curious'. By these two adjectives, he seeks to satirise the circumstances under which one killed the other. It is ironic that, under other circumstances, the surviving soldier would have been happy to socialise with 'the man he killed'. In the end, Hardy is critical of this state of affairs both because it offends against common humanity and because it contradicts common sense.

14 Edward Thomas (1878-1917)
ADLESTROP (1915)

On Tuesday 23rd June 1914, Edward Thomas and his wife Helen were in London to attend a performance of the Russian Ballet at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.* On the following day, they left his parents' house in Balham for Paddington Station and there boarded a train which was to convey them to Worcester – en route to Ledbury in Herefordshire where their American friends, Mr and Mrs Robert Frost, were staying. On that Midsummer's Day, their train stopped at Adlestrop in Gloucestershire. *They saw three short ballets: *Thamar*, Offenbach's *Le Papillon* and Richard Strauss' *La Legende de Joseph*. Since the Director of the Ballet Russe was Serge Diaghilev, it is possible that one of the dancers was Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950).

Conjecture surrounds their exact time of departure: either 10.20 am or 1.40 pm. For 10.20 am, the case is based on the semi-punctuated entry in Edward Thomas' notebook for Wednesday 24th June 1914:

> Then we stopped at Adlestrop, thro the willows cd be heard a chain of blackbirds songs at 12.45 & one thrush & no man seen, only a hiss of engine letting off steam.
>
> Stopping outside Campden by banks of long grass willow herb & meadowsweet, extraordinary silence between the two periods of travel – looking out on grey dry stones between metals & the shiny metals & over it all the elms willows & long grass – one man clears his throat – a greater than rustic silence. No house in view Stop only for a minute till signal is up.

According to *Bradshaw's Monthly Railway Guide*, this train was scheduled to stop at Adlestrop at 12.46 pm. For 1.40 pm, the case is that this train was an express-train, but was due to slip a carriage Kingham at 3.14 pm, resulting in an unscheduled stop four minutes later. It does not of course matter which train the poet took or whether – as Edna Longley speculates – he 'conflated details from different stops'; what matters is that the poem should have been inspired by actual experience. It should not rehearse a fanciful thought, but should have grown out of recent memories and record personal observations: "a characteristic poem of his has the air of being a random jotting down of chance impressions and sensations, the record of a moment of relaxed and undirected consciousness." F. R. Leavis (whom I am quoting) belongs to that generation of critics who, whilst they do begin to construct their arguments from a close analysis of the text, remain happy and ready to hand down their judgements *ex cathedra*. Most happily, Leavis' generalisations about Thomas' poetry are no less perceptive for being lofty and sweeping: "It is as if he were trying to catch some shy intuition on the edge of consciousness that would disappear if looked at directly." In both of these quotations, Leavis, though he does not name the poems, could be writing about **The Unknown Bird**, **The Lane**, **The Manor Farm** and of course **Adlestrop**.

* * * * * * * * * *

Since 2000, OCR has been commendably eager to set Edward Thomas' poetry for its AS-Level candidates; at the same time, it has consistently declined to include **Adlestrop** in its prescribed list of poems. This (as I argue elsewhere*) has always seemed to me a bit like prescribing a list of Marvell's poems which does not include **To His Coy Mistress** or a list of Frost's poems without **Tree at my Window**. One possible reason for this sniffiness towards **Adlestrop** is as follows ... **The Use of English* Volume 61 No 2 (Spring 2010) p. 137

In 1968, Harrap published *A Choice of Poets*, an anthology for schools in which Edward Thomas was one of the fourteen featured poets. The editor of this impressive anthology R. P. Hewett writes artlessly of **Adlestrop** that "this small poem describes a small railway station and the countryside around with great subtlety and fidelity"; in his Notes, Hewett asks nine questions, primarily designed to lead his young readers to the simple conclusion that "the poem reveals the essence of 'the English shires'." Unless I paraphrase him incorrectly, Andrew Motion too considers that Adlestrop (the place) is an epitome of rural England in its idyllic form: for him, 'the name' is a signifier of "ideal rural communities". Edna Longley enlarges upon this idea; she thinks that **Adlestrop** (the poem) describes a "little cosmos" and that the structure of the poem corresponds to Thomas' conception of England as "a system of vast circumferences circling round ... minute neighbouring points." If **Adlestrop** were indeed nothing more than a descriptive poem, then OCR – relying on such authoritative appreciations of it – might be justified in omitting it from the canon ...

Personally, I prefer to go back to John Burrow (*Essays in Criticism*, 1957) who suggests that, in **Adlestrop**, Edward Thomas' 'shy intuition' is into an alternative reality. Burrow states that, far from being a mere description of rural England, **Adlestrop** is nothing less than a record of a "timeless moment". In 1964, R. S. Thomas compiled for Faber the paperback selection of poems by which Edward Thomas is best known. In his brief introduction, R. S. Thomas can be heard reiterating Leavis' point: "Somewhere beyond the borders of Thomas' mind, there was a world he could never quite come at." It is this world that the details recorded in the poem endeavour to apprehend and reify; conflated or not, these details – in R. S. Thomas' inspired phrase – are required to satisfy Edward Thomas' habitual concern "to make the glimpsed good place permanent". In this poem, the 'good place' that he glimpses is a paradise which shares its landscape with an English shire (or two). What an irony it is that the **Paradise Lost** of lyric poems should be about a paradise found.

* * * * * * * * * *

Andrew Motion explains that Edward Thomas "developed several techniques by which he could capture the inflection and animation of a voice speaking without too palpable a design on the reader." "Foremost among these is the recurrent suggestion that his poems are reported or actual talk": for example, the opening of **Adlestrop** "appears to come in response to a question." This approach is responsible for a new economy of language:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop –
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop – only the name

In **Adlestrop**, each quatrain of iambic tetrameter is a photographic still, a fortuitous comparison in that nothing on that 'afternoon of heat' was moving anyway. Not unlike F. R. Leavis, Andrew Motion considers that Thomas' method of composition is "note-like": that is, he jots down scenic details and then composes a picture from them. What is the function of these pictured details: a hot afternoon, an unscheduled stop, an exasperated engine, a cleared throat, an empty platform, a name-plate? The function is Wordsworthian: in **The Prelude**, there are instances in which Wordsworth imagines that he is fleeing from a moving part of the earth or that he is experiencing the spinning of the earth on its axis. Although these descriptions are of factual/physical impossibilities, they make imaginative sense and, because they are detailed, are not altogether unconvincing. Likewise, Edward Thomas, in **Adlestrop**, pays such attention to detail that his presentation of a remote likelihood gives it credibility. Finally, it can make sense to imagine that he has stolen a glimpse through a gap in the space-time continuum and there, in the perfect stillness, against that idyllic backdrop, encountered a phantom porter who 'cleared his throat'.

For Thomas, the possibility of this perception is inspired by an extraordinary combination of circumstances, a coincidence too eerie to ignore: what coincide are the unscheduled stopping of the express-train and the equally unexpected starting-up of the birdsong. To Thomas, the convergence of this twain is suggestive: being on a train journey, he has the straightness of the railway-line to remind him of the linear movement of time – a significance not lost on Robert Graves who, in **The Next Time**, shares Thomas' vision of an accidental stop 'at Somewhere-Nowhere'. In Graves' poem, the passengers alight from their carriages, 'pick wild flowers' (presumably, willow-herb and meadowsweet) and, rather than continue their inevitable journeys up the line, 'elect to stay there' ... Without apology, Graves is revisiting the paradise of the railway-cutting in which Thomas found himself enclosed on that Wednesday afternoon:

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute, a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

What happens at Adlestrop Station? Time stands still: 'for that minute', hereby an illogical unit of measurement, the poet enters an alternative dimension and has an apprehension of timelessness – a supernatural experience to which he gives the strange name on the sign. At Adlestrop, Thomas experiences a moment at which he is no longer aware of his existence in the dimension of time: 'for that minute', he is no longer on the straight journey through time towards death, but has somehow stopped off and (though the sky is a clear blue) entered a 'mistier' world. Edward Thomas' Adlestrop is an English Eden, a pastoral haven, a world without end ... Accordingly, the eco-system of high summer complements its promise of eternal tranquillity: not only does the air smell of wild flowers and dried hay, but the little clouds are 'high' and 'a blackbird' – not visible, but 'close by' – then begins to sing in sudden harmony with 'all the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire'. Unmistakably, the image is of a heavenly chorus; here, on the border between Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, is the border between this world and the next – which, briefly, it is seen to resemble in its rustic perfections, its 'willows', its 'haycocks', its 'cloudlets' and its 'birds'.

* * * * * * * * * *

By virtue of Edward Thomas' poem, its sixteen lines, its ninety-three words, Adlestrop Station (opened in June 1853) became not only an English landmark, but also a special place on earth. Sadly, nothing on this earth – not even a sacred place – is sacred: on 3rd January 1966, it was closed. When it comes to the subsequent fate of Adlestrop Station, its prompt obliteration from the face of the earth, Wikipedia captures the tone:

> The station-building was demolished soon after closure in 1966.***** A station-seat and name-board were subsequently moved to a bus-shelter in the village. Trains on the Cotswold Line pass the station site in the Evenlode Valley where all evidence of its existence has vanished. The station-master's house is now a private residence, while the former goods yard is a vehicle dump.

English Heritage wasn't established until 1983. It therefore pleases me to think that, if Adlestrop Station had faced its closure in our more enlightened age, then the station-master's house would have become a museum to the Dymock Poets, the station-building would have been converted to a tea room and the goods yard to a car park, surrounded – of course – by 'willows, willow-herb, and grass'. Visitors would still have been able to see what Thomas saw: photographed beside the sign, they would have been standing 'on the bare platform' and listening for that blackbird ... *****In 1961, not even John Betjeman and Nikolaus Pevsner had been able to prevent the demolition of the Euston Arch (built in 1837).

It was on 16th August 1994 that I paid my own visit to Adlestrop and made my pilgrimage to the name-board in the bus-shelter.

* * * * * * * * * *

Begun in 1914, **Adlestrop** reflects a cultural shift in the style of English poetry. "Make it new," commanded Ezra Pound in that same year. The brief statements of fact that record Thomas' visionary moment – 'It was late June', 'Someone cleared his throat' – are dynamic and do exactly that; furthermore, the interplay between sentence-form and verse-form involves a very modern use of enjambment. In the first and the second quatrains, the two 3-word and two 4-word sentences, not to mention the four mid-line full-stops for which they allow, would not be out of place in a poem written in 2014. Also worth noting for its technical daring is what many readers miss: the elliptical grammar between the second and the third quatrain ... There is no punctuation-mark after 'only the name' with the result that the name-board becomes the first of seven sights that Thomas 'saw' at Adlestrop, the other six comprising the third quatrain (as in a list) and completing a sentence of 32 words. In the fourth quatrain, Thomas' half-rhyming of 'mistier' with 'Gloucestershire' is even more adroit, radically gesturing – as it does – towards that half-formed world on the edge of his consciousness.

By contrast, Thomas has not finished with the poetic diction of the nineteenth century. What kind of adverb is 'unwontedly'? He gets away with this clumsy archaism a] because it is unique to the quatrain and b] because it is expertly placed. The other clumsy archaisms are 'haycocks dry' and 'no whit less still'; the fourth poeticism is 'lonely fair' and the fifth is 'cloudlets'. "He was a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility," began Leavis ... If these conscious poeticisms do not jar on a modern sensibility, then it is because they have been claimed by the colloquial flow of Thomas' syntax and swept forwards by it.

Further reading
T. S. Eliot: **Burnt Norton** (1935)

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APPENDIX

EMILY DICKINSON

Peter Cash's commentary on this poem is to be found in **Bookmark No 7**:

Poem 520: I started Early – Took my Dog

THOMAS HARDY

Peter Cash's commentaries on these poems are to be found in **Bookmark No 16**:

A Broken Appointment
At Castle Boterel

Beeny Cliff
Drummer Hodge
During Wind and Rain
Neutral Tones
The Darkling Thrush
The Going
The Oxen
The Ruined Maid
The Voice
Transformations

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